

**VIRTUES VERSUS THE "ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT": A  
CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S  
RECLAIMING OF THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION IN  
MORAL THEORY**

**JONATHAN HOCH**

**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of**



**MASTER OF ARTS**

**at the**

**UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH**

**Supervisor: Prof. A.A. van Niekerk**

**November 2001**

## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any other university for a degree.

## **Summary**

This thesis seeks to evaluate MacIntyre's claim that recourse to the tradition of virtue ethics in the Aristotelian-Thomist sense is the only viable intellectual option, given the alleged demise of the so-called "Enlightenment Project".

It raises a twofold question: First, is it coherent to argue that MacIntyre's re-appropriation of an ancient moral tradition is possible? Does such a claim duly reckon with the conditions under which meaningful forms are understood? The first claim being defended is that MacIntyre does not sufficiently respect Gadamer's conditions under which understanding occurs. It is also argued that MacIntyre does not provide coherent conditions for rationally choosing between traditions in order to possibly vindicate them. As such, MacIntyre's re-appropriating of the Aristotelian tradition in moral theory is not coherent and convincing.

Secondly, does the dichotomy of "Nietzsche versus Aristotle" represent the only viable alternatives for us in our efforts to continue the enterprise of moral theorising? The second claim being defended is that the dichotomy is not a coherent way of moral theorising. The third claim being defended is that Gadamer represents a viable alternative to the ultimatum in that his thought provides the possibility of a more coherent way of moral theorising than MacIntyre's.

## **Opsomming**

Hierdie tesis stel ten doel die evaluasie van MacIntyre se standpunt dat die deugde-etiek van die Aristoteliaanse-Thomisties tradisie die enigste blywende opsie is, aangesien die sogenaamde "Verligtingsprojek" misluk het.

Die tesis stel twee kernvrae aan die orde: Eerstens, is dit sinvol om te argumenteer dat MacIntyre se appropriasie van bogenoemde etiese tradisie moontlik is? Verleen so n aanspraak genoegsame waarde aan die kondisies waaronder sindraers verstaan word? Die eerste standpunt wat verdedig word, is dat MacIntyre nie genoeg ag slaan op Gadamer se opvatting oor die kondisies vir verstaan nie. Daar word verder ook geargumenteer dat MacIntyre nie koherente kondisies aandui vir 'n keuse tussen tradisies nie en as sodanig ondermyn dit die koherensie van sy werk. MacIntyre se appropriasie van die Aristoteliaanse tradisie in morele teorie is dus nie koherent of oortuigend nie.

Tweedens, is die dichotomie van "Nietzsche of Aristoteles" die enigste moontlike alternatief vir die voortgaande studie van morele teorie? Die tweede aanspraak wat verdedig word, is dat die dichotomie nie 'n koherente wyse van morele argumentasie is nie. Die derde aanspraak wat verdedig word is dat Gadamer 'n werkbare alternatief verskaf vir die dichotomie. Sy denke voorsien 'n meer koherente wyse om met morele teorie om te gaan as die een wat MacIntyre verskaf.



*The financial assistance by the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed, and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation.*

*To Paul and Nigel*

## Contents

### **Acknowledgements**

<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
A disquieting hypothesis on contemporary philosophy	3
The nature of moral disagreement today	5
Why the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality <i>had to fail</i>	7
Nietzsche or Aristotle? – An ultimatum	12
Tasks beyond <i>After Virtue</i>	17
Problem Statement: a twofold question to MacIntyre	18
 <b>2 The re-appropriation of an Ancient Moral Tradition</b>	 <b>22</b>
Multiple Rationalities	23
Tradition(s) and rationality(ies)	27
The relativist challenge	32
The preconditions for understanding a 'foreign' tradition	36
Gadamer's conditions under which meaningful forms are understood	43
The preconditions for rationally choosing between traditions	51
 <b>3 The rationality of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition</b>	 <b>57</b>
Three rival versions of moral enquiry – Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition	57
Tradition versus Encyclopaedia	70
Tradition versus Genealogy	74
Tradition vindicated?	77
 <b>4 Nietzsche or Aristotle? – An Ultimatum</b>	 <b>80</b>
Bernstein on MacIntyre	81
On the idea of a third alternative to the ultimatum	86
 <b>5 Conclusion</b>	 <b>97</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to all the members of the philosophy department for over a half-decade of support and for the opportunity to learn so much.

Special thanks to Anton van Niekerk for being a mentor to me and for showing me how it should be done. Without his exceptional guidance and always inspiring words, I may have given up Philosophy years earlier. His dedicated supervision of this thesis and his bold and lucid criticisms of my work made it a pleasure to write.

Thanks to Robert Thorburn for the translation of the abstract into Afrikaans.

Thanks to my friends who were always there for me in my final year, especially, Dogfather, Choot, Jamo and Q. Lastly and most importantly, thanks to my family for their unwavering support of all my ventures.



**1****Introduction**

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Alasdair MacIntyre is referred to as being “the past, present, future and all-time philosophical historians’ historian of philosophy” (TRVME: back cover). MacIntyre can rightfully be acclaimed as one of the foremost moral theorists of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his now famous trilogy (*After virtue*; *Whose justice, which rationality?* and *Three rival versions of moral enquiry*) are, according to what now seems to be the case, destined to become a classic of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. MacIntyre’s thought is one of the most powerful re-evaluations of the importance and force of tradition in moral philosophy. In this sense, he adds his voice to the choir of critiques of modernity and the enlightenment in the course of the previous century, although his particular brand of critique has a focus that is different from most others. As such he turns out to be a powerful voice in the larger debate between liberals and communitarians in political and moral philosophy.

As a critic of the Enlightenment, MacIntyre has much in common with Gadamer. Not only are both thinkers highly critical of the Enlightenment, but they also make it one of their main challenges to restore intellectual credibility to the concept of tradition. Both are intensely concerned and involved with a re-appreciation of the pivotal insights of Aristotelian ethics. However, the differences between them are almost more intriguing than the similarities, and a great part of this thesis will be an effort to show how remarkably differently they go about arguing for the restoration of the virtue tradition in ethics, and how fundamentally their methodologies differ. Whereas MacIntyre wishes to restore the Aristotelian tradition by (allegedly) simply dismissing the Enlightenment, Gadamer understands the conditions under which traditions are interpreted and revitalized much better in my opinion. This will be argued in much more detail later on.



MacIntyre's philosophical work is marked early on in his career by expressing passionate commitment for Marxism and Christianity. It is indeed MacIntyre's passion for that which he holds dear and the scope of those dearly held beliefs that makes him stand out as a philosopher. In Ernest Gellner's words, "what distinguishes professor MacIntyre is not the number of beliefs he has doubted, but the number of beliefs he has embraced. His capacity for doubt we share or surpass; it is his capacity for faith which is distinctive and perhaps unrivalled" (Gellner, 1974: 193).

MacIntyre's first major work on ethics, *A Short History of Ethics*, was published in 1967. Here MacIntyre methodically starts his quest of taking modernity and its reluctance to view moral concepts in historical context to task. With his 1971 *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, MacIntyre similarly takes Marxism and Christianity to task for failing to be "able to provide the light that our social and individual lives need" (AV: viii). This failing sows the seeds of MacIntyre's discontent concerning contemporary moral theory.

With the publishing of *After Virtue* in 1981, this discontent quite suddenly turns to 'rage against modern morality and the "Enlightenment Project" in general'. Here MacIntyre's work takes on a more critical turn. Horton and Mendus (1994: 1) make no exaggeration when they say that *After Virtue* is characterised by "complete disenchantment". The metamorphosis of MacIntyre's moral theorising comes to a lucid head with what is rightly regarded as his *magnum opus*.

The context in which MacIntyre's ethical theorising arises is the rightful indignation of logical positivism and the effects that the latter had on moral theory. In the world of analytical philosophy, the thinker mostly responsible for the hold that positivism gained on moral theory was A.J. Ayer, and the book in which he did this was his critique of ethics and theology in his *Language, Truth and Logic*, first published in 1936. For Ayer, our knowledge is of two distinct kinds: that which relates to questions of empirical fact and



that which relates to questions of value (Ayer, 1971: 136). For Ayer, only the former can be taken seriously:

We shall set ourselves to show that in so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary 'scientific' statements; and that in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true nor false.

(Ayer, 1971: 136)

Ayer maintains the Enlightenment anti-thesis between (scientific) reason and the *emotions*. He maintains that since ethical expressions are merely expressions of emotion, they should not belong to ethical philosophy, for true philosophy works in the realm of reason. For Ayer, "[a] strictly philosophical treatise on ethics should therefore make no ethical pronouncements" (Ayer, 1971: 137). He goes on to say that ethical judgements have "no validity" (145), that it is "impossible to dispute about questions of value" (146), that "ethical concepts are pseudo-concepts and therefore unanalysable" (148). All ethical language and claims are therefore of a noncognitive nature. Hence the rise of "emotivism" as the standard position on the cognitive nature of moral language at the pinnacle of logical positivism.

This era of scientific reason characteristic of the Enlightenment Project represents the bugbear against which MacIntyre's moral theorising reacts. For MacIntyre, Ayer's emotivism is utterly unacceptable, if for no other reason than that it makes it impossible for ethics and moral theory to produce moral precepts that can be translated into actual moral practice. Here I fully agree with MacIntyre. In turning to MacIntyre's philosophical project, we must keep the background context of this 'disenchantment' with Ayer in mind.

### **A disquieting hypothesis on contemporary philosophy**



MacIntyre's *After Virtue* opens with him painting a scandalous scene in which people turn on the natural sciences. Scientists are blamed for a series of environmental disasters and their research is literally and metaphorically torn apart. Only fragments of the scientific scheme remain. This fragmentation makes the overall scientific scheme incoherent. Not only are the natural sciences in a state of grave disorder, but moreover, no one has the conceptual tools necessary to see the disorder for the disaster it is. It is not simply that people cannot put the puzzle that science has become back together, but that they do not see the puzzle as such. MacIntyre tells us that that this scientific disaster is (hypothetically) an analogy for what has happened in the moral sphere:

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disaster as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We indeed possess simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.

(AV: 2)

MacIntyre is quick to raise an objection to this proposal. Surely such a world-altering historical event cannot simply vanish from view? If such a catastrophe really occurred would it not be on record? To his own questions, MacIntyre smugly retorts that it has to be that only an elite few will see that what is really a catastrophe is not seen as such by the 'masses'. The dilemma with this retort is that MacIntyre seems to have deprived himself, in expanding his hypothesis, of arguments necessary to sustain it. For if the proposed catastrophe cannot readily be recognized, how does MacIntyre



know about it? (AV: 3). MacIntyre's point is that for the hypothesis to be plausible (i.e. 'true') it must appear implausible:

For if the hypothesis is true, it will necessarily appear implausible, since one way of stating part of the hypothesis is precisely to assert that we are in a condition which almost nobody recognises and which perhaps nobody at all can recognise fully. If my hypothesis appeared initially plausible, it would certainly be false.

(AV: 4)

MacIntyre's hypothesis thus puts him into an antagonistic stance and onto the back foot. His hypothesis must, if it is true, initially be considered implausible. Its plausibility or implausibility can only be shown in retrospect. We must then follow MacIntyre's thesis in order to attain a point from which we can look at the hypothesis in retrospect.

### **The nature of moral disagreement today**

Consider the following arguments concerning abortion:

- Everybody has certain rights over his or her own person, including his or her own body. It follows from the nature of these rights that at the stage when the embryo is essentially a part of the mother's body, the mother has a right to make her own uncoerced decision on whether she will have an abortion or not. Therefore abortion is morally permissible and ought to be allowed by law.
- I cannot will that my mother should have had an abortion when she was pregnant with me, except perhaps if it had been certain that the embryo was dead or gravely damaged. But if I cannot will this in my own case, how can I consistently deny to others the right to life that I claim for myself? I would break the so-called Golden Rule

unless I denied that a mother has in general a right to an abortion. I am of course thereby committed to the view that abortion ought to be legally prohibited.

- Murder is wrong. Murder is the taking of innocent life. An embryo is an identifiable individual, differing from a newborn infant only in being at an earlier stage on the long road to adult capacities and, if any life is innocent, that of an embryo is. If infanticide is murder, as it is, abortion is murder. So abortion is not only morally wrong, but ought to be legally prohibited.

It is striking to note that contemporary moral theorising is characterised by disagreement. Arguments generally can go on and on without terminus. All sides to the above debate can give (apparently) good arguments for their viewpoints, but there seems to be no decisive way of deciding between them. In short, according to MacIntyre, "there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture" (AV: 6).

Indeed, this statement by MacIntyre may seem hardly unusual. Many people today do proclaim that we cannot solve contemporary moral problems like the abortion issue because *all* moral (and evaluative) argument *must* be interminable. MacIntyre calls this, the 'challenge of *emotivism*'. Emotivists will say that you have your view on the morality of abortion and that they have their view and that is simply that. For them, only factual judgements are *true* or *false*. It is only in the realm of *fact* that there are rational criteria by means of which people can secure consensus. For *them*, moral judgements are neither true nor false and it makes no sense to say that agreement in moral judgement can be secured by any rational method. (AV: 6-13). According to MacIntyre's definition,



Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are *nothing but* expression of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character

(AV: 11)

Emotivists hold that it is universally the case that morality is a matter of taste. This belief seems downright incoherent to me. Is this 'fact' that the emotivists hold onto (i.e. that morality is simply a matter of taste) not also a matter of taste? Emotivism cannot stand up to the scrutiny of a self-reflexive argument. According to emotivists, where there are principles in moral theorising, they are illusory – masks covering up the subjectivism involved in moral choice. According to MacIntyre (AV: 21), emotivism presents itself throughout the history of philosophy in a variety of guises. MacIntyre seems pained by the fact that people today act and speak *as if* emotivism were true even if they are not consciously aware of it. Emotivism's persistence is a bugbear for him and he says that it marks "a degeneration, a grave cultural loss" (AV: 21).

Where does our culture of emotivism come from? According to MacIntyre, it is the successor of the failure of the Enlightenment Project of 'justifying morality'. The Enlightenment Project in general is that of moving from *mythos* to *logos*. It is the project of overcoming superstition and giving everything – the moral sphere included – a rational basis. Given the failure of this project – the project of providing a rational vindication for morality – it was (incorrectly) assumed (consciously or not) that morality has an emotivist basis. MacIntyre's point that the Enlightenment project failed is nothing new in philosophical discourse. This debate rages on and on. More interesting and original is his claim that it *had to fail*.

### **Why the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality *had to fail*<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup> This title is taken from chapter five of *After Virtue*. The emphasis is mine.



The historical ancestor of the modern moral scheme is analysed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's moral scheme requires three elements:

- i. Untutored human nature
- ii. Moral precepts that allow man to pass from his natural state to the state in-which-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-*telos*.
- iii. Man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-*telos* (AV: 52)

The problem - the 'modern muddle' in moral theory – occurs, according to MacIntyre, when the idea of a *telos* is discredited. The joint secular rejection of theology and the rejection of the Aristotelian notion of a *telos*<sup>2</sup> means that suddenly iii. is taken out of the moral scheme. Says MacIntyre:

*Since the whole point of ethics – both as a theoretical and a practical discipline – is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a telos leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear (my emphasis).*

(AV: 52)

What we are left with since the advent of the modern world is ii. – a set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context and i. – the notion of man as he is. What then is one to make of the link between i. and ii.? The link becomes random and fragmented. What 'Enlightened' philosophers have tried to do is to find a rational basis in morality from conceptually analysing 'man-as-he-is' (i.). They "share[d] in the project of constructing valid arguments which will move from premises concerning human nature as they

---

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle believed, for example, that an acorn fell to the ground because that is where it belonged. Along came empirical science and the theory of gravity and Aristotle can no longer be taken seriously.



understand it to be to conclusions about the authority of moral rules and precepts" (AV: 50). This task is doomed to failure from the outset. Such philosophers have inherited incoherent fragments from a once coherent scheme and tried to put them together again. This task is, according to MacIntyre, at once "impossible" and "quixotic" (AV: 53) because "[e]ach of the three elements of the scheme -...- requires reference to the other two if its status and function are to be intelligible" (AV: 51).

Herein lies the 'modern muddle' concerning contemporary moral theory. Since the enlightenment, moral theorists have been oblivious to its existence, with two notable exceptions. Kant, according to MacIntyre, comes second closest to adequately recognising the modern muddle. In his second *Critique*, Kant acknowledges that without a teleological framework, the whole project of morality becomes unintelligible. This framework is to be presupposed by pure practical reason. According to MacIntyre, eighteenth century 'Enlightenment' philosophers hold such a framework unconsciously and unwittingly in a bastardised form:

[I]f my thesis is correct, Kant was right; morality did in the eighteenth century, as a matter of historical fact, presuppose something very like the teleological scheme of God, freedom and happiness as the final crown of virtue which Kant propounds. *Detach morality from that framework and you will no longer have morality; or, at the very least, you will have radically transformed its character*" (my emphasis).

(AV: 53)

According to MacIntyre, Nietzsche comes closest<sup>3</sup> to recognising the 'modern muddle' for what it is. MacIntyre calls Nietzsche "*the moral philosopher*" (AV: 108) because of his serious pursuit of the problem of emotivism and subjectivism in moral theory. Nietzsche is right to see that in modern moral parlance, people are uttering sentences of subjective taste under the guise of

---

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of MacIntyre, I suppose.



principled theorising. His description is spot-on. Where he goes wrong is that he does not understand the historical circumstances that lead to the muddle. He does not recognise the cause of the modern muddle<sup>4</sup> and moreover, presents frivolous<sup>5</sup> solutions to it.

What are the consequences of the 'modern muddle' for moral judgements? In the classical Aristotelian tradition, one calls something 'good' or 'bad' in terms of the extent to which it meets its function (telos). A 'good' watch is a watch that keeps the time well. To call the watch 'good' is to refer to a factual statement. The factual statement is "this watch keeps the time well". These factual statements extend to persons and actions. To say that an action is 'just' or 'right' is to say that it is the function that a 'good' man would perform in those specific circumstances. Says Macintyre:

Within this tradition moral and evaluative statements can be called true or false in precisely the way in which all other factual statements can so be called. *But once the notion of essential human purposes or functions disappears from morality, it begins to appear implausible to treat moral judgements as factual statements*" (my emphasis).

(AV: 57)

We still speak *as if* moral judgements are true or false, but it baffles us to think in virtue of what they are true or false. "That this should be so," says MacIntyre (AV: 57) "is perfectly intelligible if the historical hypothesis which I have sketched is true: that moral judgements are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by those practices."

Another manifestation of the malaise of the 'modern muddle' is the Enlightenment commitment to the proclamation that no 'ought' conclusion

---

<sup>4</sup> He locates its cause, as always, in 'the will to power'.

<sup>5</sup> See the next section "Nietzsche or Aristotle? – An ultimatum".



can be derived from 'is' premises. In the classical tradition this was simply not a problem. For Aristotle, 'man' stands to 'good man' as 'watch' stands to 'good watch' – one cannot separate man and things from their function and purpose. "It is only" says MacIntyre (AV: 56), "when a man is thought of as an individual prior to and apart from all roles that 'man' ceases to become a functional concept." In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle takes the starting-point of ethical enquiry to be that the relationship of man to 'living well' is analogous to that of a harpist 'playing well' (AV: 56). In contemporary (post-teleological) moral parlance and idiom we still speak *as if* the Aristotelian scheme exists, whilst still clinging to the proclamation that no 'ought' conclusion can be derived from 'is' premises. According to MacIntyre,

[T]he 'No "ought" conclusion from "is" premises' principle becomes and inescapable truth for philosophers whose culture possesses only the impoverished moral vocabulary which results from the episodes I have recounted. That it was taken to be a timeless logical truth was a sign of a deep lack of historical consciousness which then informed and even now infects too much of moral philosophy. For its initial proclamation was itself a crucial historical event. It signals both a final break with the classical tradition and the decisive breakdown of the eighteenth century project of justifying morality in the context of the inherited, but already incoherent, fragments left behind from tradition.

(AV: 6)

MacIntyre laments the loss of traditional moral theorising and much of the context in which it takes place. He notes that what he deems a loss and degradation, is deemed to be the triumph of the autonomous self by Enlightenment thinkers (AV: 58). For Enlightenment thinkers, theology and teleology represent an imprisoning and hierarchical world<sup>6</sup>. The scientific

---

<sup>6</sup> The problem I find with a teleological scheme is that it can all too easily be used to justify a hierarchical order. In such an order, for example, if your *telos* is to be a slave, then you are supposedly forever stuck in that position. It precludes the possibility of bettering oneself.



refutation of them both serves to liberate the self from an oppressive world order. Thus the individual, the distinctively modern self is invented.

After telling us why the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality *had to fail* (was *doomed* to failure), MacIntyre makes perhaps his most controversial move in *After Virtue*. He presents us with a stark ultimatum concerning what we are to make of the 'modern muddle'. The stakes of this ultimatum are so high that it demands our immediate undivided attention.

### **Nietzsche or Aristotle? – An ultimatum**

Nietzsche's greatness as a moral philosopher for MacIntyre is twofold. Firstly, he recognises that appeals to objectivity in the moral sphere are merely expressions of subjective will and secondly, he understands the nature of the problems that the former fact poses for moral philosophy. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche jeers at the Enlightenment Project's agenda to find objective foundations for morality. Where Nietzsche goes wrong, according to MacIntyre, is to say that if morality is merely an expression of will then morality can only be what one's will creates. Nietzsche razes morality to the ground. In its place there can only be the will to power and the *Übermensch*, that "at once absurd and dangerous fantasy" (AV: 107). It is Nietzsche's recognition of the state of contemporary moral philosophy that constitutes his greatness for MacIntyre. MacIntyre seems to agree with Nietzsche when the latter says (in MacIntyre's words):

The rational and rationally justified autonomous moral subject of the eighteenth century is a fiction, an illusion;

He disagrees with what Nietzsche goes on to say following this (again in MacIntyre's words):

---

What this argument entails, and this is what I will show MacIntyre forgets (see Bernstein on MacIntyre in Chapter 4), is commitment to ideals hammered out during the Enlightenment.



so, Nietzsche resolves, let will replace reason and let us make ourselves into autonomous moral subjects by some gigantic and heroic act of the will, an act of the will that by its quality may remind us of that archaic aristocratic self-assertiveness which preceded what Nietzsche took to be the disaster of slave-morality and by which its effectiveness may be the prophetic precursor of a new era.

(AV: 107)

The preceding paragraph shows Nietzsche's 'bad side' according to MacIntyre,

For it is in his relentlessly serious pursuit of the problem, not in his frivolous solutions that Nietzsche's greatness lies, the greatness that makes him *the* moral philosopher *if* the only alternatives to Nietzsche's moral philosophy turn out to be those formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors.

(AV: 108)

Nietzsche's moral theorising is essentially *reactive* (destructive). It is only because the Enlightenment Project *failed* that he can take up his position regarding the *Übermensch*. The failure of the Enlightenment Project is the precondition for the possibility of Nietzsche's critique. Similarly, the Enlightenment Project to rationally justify morality only began with – chiefly – the rejection of Aristotelian teleology. If Aristotle is right and the Enlightenment wrong, then the Nietzschean critique does not even come into the picture. "Hence" says MacIntyre

The defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns *in the end* on the answer to the question: was it right in the first place to reject Aristotle? For if Aristotle's position in ethics and politics – or something like it – could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would be pointless.

(AV: 111)

Finally, we are ready to face the ultimatum that MacIntyre puts on the table. He says that:

*Either one must follow through the aspirations of the Enlightenment project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic or one must hold that the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken but should have never commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative[...]*<sup>7</sup>

(AV: 111)

MacIntyre opts for the latter option concerning the above ultimatum. His position is clearly at one with those philosophers<sup>8</sup> who are quick to 'rage against the Enlightenment', liberalism and modernity. According to MacIntyre, what Enlightenment philosophers never adequately answer, and Nietzsche sees this, is the question, "what sort of person am I to become?" (AV: 112). Enlightenment philosophers are too concerned with rule following. This is unsurprising, says MacIntyre, when we recall the consequences of the expulsion of Aristotelian teleology from the moral world. MacIntyre believes that Ronald Dworkin has hit on an important strand of modernity (and liberalism) when he says, "rules become the primary concept of the moral life" (AV: 112). In Aristotelian theory, it is the virtues (as moral precepts) that are fundamental to understanding rules and moreover, *how they are*

---

<sup>7</sup> This is my emphasis. MacIntyre puts an emphasis (italic) on "either" and "or" in the original passage.

<sup>8</sup> One of whom comes to mind is Martin Heidegger, especially in his views on the danger of technology in *The Question Concerning Technology*.



*applied*. By contrast, in modernist times, “[q]ualities of character then generally come to be prized only because they will lead us to follow the right set of rules” (AV: 112). MacIntyre sums up the crux of his argument when he says:

Hence on the modern view the justification of the virtues depends on some prior justification of rules and principles; and if the latter become radically problematic, as they have so also must the former. Suppose however that in articulating the problems of morality the ordering of evaluative concepts has been misconceived by the spokesmen of modernity and more particularly of liberalism; suppose that we need to attend to the *virtues* in the first place to understand the function and authority of rules; we ought then to begin the enquiry in quite a different way in which it is begun by Hume or Diderot or Kant or Mill. On this interestingly Nietzsche and Aristotle agree.

(AV: 112)

To return to the nature of the ultimatum, MacIntyre has asked us to choose between Nietzsche and Aristotle following the demise of the ‘Enlightenment Project’. MacIntyre sees the task following this ultimatum as twofold. Firstly, he is obliged to show that the initial rejection of Aristotle’s teaching of the virtues is mistaken and secondly, that the Aristotelian moral tradition can be rationally vindicated. MacIntyre notes with horror that if Aristotelian moral theory cannot be rationally vindicated then Nietzsche’s stance may be plausible. (AV: 238). MacIntyre then boldly states his contentions on the ultimatum. Nietzsche’s stance is unsuccessful against the Aristotelian moral tradition. If he were to win the ultimatum it would be by default because both he and MacIntyre have shown that contemporary moral arguments can only be subjective and emotivist in that they are incommensurable. If Aristotle cannot be vindicated, Nietzsche wins. If Nietzsche wins there should be *no morality* or perhaps less strongly and better, it will be generally accepted that we will create our own morality (-ies). Yet MacIntyre is quick



to dispel this possibility when he emphatically says of Nietzsche, "He does not win." (AV: 239). Why is this so?

For Nietzsche to win the argument by positive argumentation he has to rebut the case that MacIntyre makes for the social situatedness of the virtues and substantiate his claims on the will to power and the subjective individualism of the *Übermensch*. MacIntyre asks why it is necessary for Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to take the burden of morality on himself. Why is it necessary to create one's own morality? It is MacIntyre's contention that only a self-absorbed and isolated person would need to do this. It is only in social context, according to MacIntyre that man's true good exists. Goods can only be discovered as a member of a society in which the virtues are central. It is only when one is cut-off from such a society that one has to take the burden of morality on oneself. (AV: 240). Nietzsche, according to MacIntyre, does not adequately grasp that

[t]o cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside of oneself.

(AV: 240)

Not only does Nietzsche not win the argument by default, claims MacIntyre, but it is from the perspective of the tradition of moral solipsism and solitude that we can best understand where Nietzsche makes his mistakes (AV: 240). If Nietzsche takes more heed of the normative force of tradition, such solipsism need not arise. This illustrates the interrelatedness of MacIntyre's twofold task, namely defending his tradition of the *virtues* and defeating Nietzsche's claim to moral subjectivism. It is in defending his notion of Aristotelian moral tradition, the tradition of the *virtues*, that MacIntyre can best defeat Nietzsche.



Nietzsche's individualist position is, MacIntyre suddenly realises (AV: 241), yet one more movement in the unfolding of liberal individualist modernity. Nietzsche's fiction, the *Übermensch*, represents individualism's final attempt to escape its own consequences. For it was only in mistakenly rejecting a social conception of moral theory that the need arises to create the *Übermensch*. MacIntyre now concludes, without repealing the need to retain and answer this own ultimatum, that it is liberal individualism more than Nietzsche that is his avowed enemy:

[I]t now turns out to be the case that in the end the Nietzschean stance is only one more facet of that very moral culture of which Nietzsche took himself to be an implacable critic. It is therefore after all the case that the crucial moral opposition is between liberal individualism in some version or other and the Aristotelian tradition in some version or other.

(AV: 241)

### **Tasks beyond *After Virtue***

With the last words of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's self-appointed task of reclaiming the Aristotelian tradition in moral theory increasingly takes on the appearance of a knight riding forth with an ancient sacred quest, backed by the force of a noble tradition:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes our predicament. We are not

waiting for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.

(AV: 245)

MacIntyre concludes *After Virtue* (1981), the novel-thesis that asks the fundamental questions that his later works try to answer and expand on, by giving himself a project: to restate the Aristotelian tradition in such a way that rationality and intelligibility are restored to moral theorising. In addition, he concludes that we still lack a rationally defensible and coherent account of liberal individualism. MacIntyre raises three possible objections to these conclusions (AV: 241-244):

Firstly, he recognises that his arguments presuppose a particular conception of *rationality*. MacIntyre provides this account seven years later with *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988). Secondly, there will be those who find fault with his treatment of Aristotle. Thirdly, there will be those who deny that the Aristotelian moral tradition is a viable alternative to those post-Enlightenment schemes - liberal individualism and modernity. This objection lies behind the final work in the MacIntyre's trilogy, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990).

This thesis focuses on possible objections one and three. The adequacy of MacIntyre's specific treatment of Aristotle falls outside its scope. So far, the major content of MacIntyre's thesis (for the scope of this thesis) has been explicated. What remains is to accurately (re-)formulate MacIntyre's chief contentions and then importantly, to critically evaluate these contentions by putting a twofold question to MacIntyre.

### **Problem Statement: a twofold question to MacIntyre**



This thesis seeks to evaluate MacIntyre's claim that recourse to the tradition of virtue ethics in the Aristotelian-Thomist<sup>9</sup> sense is the only viable intellectual option, given the alleged demise of the so-called "Enlightenment Project".

To recapitulate, according to MacIntyre, the "Enlightenment Project" was not only a mistake, but "had to fail" because it relinquished a vital element/presupposition of the fundamental scheme in terms of which moral theorising takes place, viz. a teleological conception of human nature. Given the failure of modernist moral theorising, the enlightenment project gives rise to the situation in which we are confronted with the stark opposites of Nietzsche and Aristotle. Either one takes recourse to the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues, uncontaminated by the derailments of modernist thinking, or one has to recognise that we are entirely the creators of our moral precepts and intuitions.

This thesis raises a twofold question:

- *First, is it coherent to argue that such a re-appropriation of an ancient moral tradition is possible? Does such a claim duly reckon with the conditions under which meaningful forms are understood and applied?* In order to answer this question, the author intends to explore Gadamer's implied criticism of MacIntyre by constructing a dialogue between the two thinkers.
- *Second, the question is whether the dichotomy of "Nietzsche versus Aristotle" represents the only viable alternatives for us in our efforts to continue the enterprise of moral theorising.* The author is influenced by the idea of a third alternative in this regard, inspired by the thought of, amongst others, thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Richard Bernstein.

---

<sup>9</sup> While Aristotle is the hero of *After Virtue*, Thomas Aquinas is the hero of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Aquinas is the one to further expand and improve on Aristotle's moral



Chapter 2 will focus on the first question, namely on the coherence of the re-appropriation of a moral tradition. The answer to this question is largely to be found in, amongst other sources, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Chapter 2 exposes MacIntyre's conception of rationality. The purpose of this exposition is twofold. Firstly, it presents the preconditions for re-appropriating an ancient moral scheme. Here, Gadamer's preconditions for understanding are exposed in order to test critically MacIntyre's preconditions for understanding a 'foreign' tradition. Secondly, it presents the possibility of ultimately choosing between moral schemes and their accompanying rationalities. The chapter also discusses the spectre of relativism in MacIntyre's conception of rationality and the consequences thereof.

Chapter 3 will also continue to answer the first question and will specifically focus on the rationality of the tradition that MacIntyre wants to revive, namely the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition of the virtues. Chapter 3 draws largely on *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. It exposes MacIntyre's treatment of Encyclopedia and Genealogy as rivals to Tradition in moral theory and evaluates the extent to which MacIntyre vindicates Tradition against its rivals.

Chapter 4 answers the second question raised above. It focuses on the coherence and meaningfulness (or lack thereof) of MacIntyre's "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" ultimatum. It presents Bernstein's views on the dubious nature of the ultimatum. This chapter contains the "constructive" element of the thesis when the author reveals a "third alternative" to the ultimatum based particularly on the findings in this thesis on Gadamer and Bernstein.

Chapter 5, the conclusion, will (re-)present the findings on the twofold question that I am posing to MacIntyre. Finally, it will develop the



constructive side of the thesis, namely the possibility of a third alternative to the ultimatum.

## 2

**The re-appropriation of an Ancient Moral Tradition**

*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* – the sequel to *After Virtue* – is MacIntyre's attempt to rationally back up two of the major claims of the latter. *After Virtue's* first claim is that "we still, in spite of the efforts of three centuries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, lack any coherent rationally defensible statement of a liberal individualist point of view". The second claim is that "the Aristotelian tradition can be restated in a way that restores rationality and intelligibility to our own moral and social attitudes and commitments" (WJWR: Preface). *After Virtue* requires an account of practical rationality that can support these claims and it is necessary for MacIntyre to elucidate

both what makes it rational to act in one way rather than another and what makes it rational to advance and defend one conception of rationality rather than another.

(WJWR: Preface)

The question whether it is coherent to re-appropriate an ancient moral tradition as MacIntyre does presupposes an adequate understanding of rationality. The major two-fold question asked in this chapter is "what is the nature of rationality?" and "what are the pre-conditions for understanding traditions, choosing between them and ultimately re-appropriating one of them?" By closely linking practical rationality and tradition, MacIntyre follows in the footsteps of thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>1</sup> What then, according to MacIntyre, is the nature of rationality?

---

<sup>1</sup> The latter has an aversion to the schism between – or anti-thesis of *tradition* and *rationality*, as advocated by the Enlightenment Project. Gadamer points out that the Enlightenment is responsible for both the negative connotations associated with the notion of "prejudice" and the negative implications of any recourse to tradition as a legitimate authority (Warnke, 1987: 75). For him, the Enlightenment is simply 'prejudiced against prejudice'. MacIntyre, like Gadamer (see Warnke, 1987: 75-82), tries to rehabilitate prejudice and tradition (although MacIntyre never really refers to 'tradition' as 'prejudice' – presumably to avoid its negative contemporary connotations) as necessary components of rationality.



## Multiple Rationalities

MacIntyre's chief target in the rationality debate is the old, dead and decaying donkey that has been (since its conception during the Enlightenment) and continues to be tethered and flogged. I am referring to, of course, disinterested, impartial, value-free, tradition-free, universal reason. Few philosophers, I imagine, would stand by this chimera today.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Enlightenment' notion of rationality requires, according to MacIntyre, that we arrive at impartial reason, devoid of prejudice and partisanship. This requirement, however, according to MacIntyre, is question begging. It is itself historical in that it presupposes a specific account of justice – namely that of Liberal Individualism. Similarly, 'Enlightenment' rationality justifies the notion of justice as Liberal Individualism. For MacIntyre, 'Enlightenment' rationality and its corresponding theory of justice are used to justify each other. The so-called neutrality of this type of rationality is a chimera. It tries to envisage a conception of arriving at a notion of rationality that any socially disembodied being would arrive at whilst ignoring the social context in which the notion arises. It illegitimately ignores, so MacIntyre's constant refrain chants, the inescapable historical and social situatedness of any theory of rationality and life and meaning in general. (WJWR: 3-4).

Not unlike the 'modern muddle concerning morality and moral theory' (see the introduction and *After Virtue*), there exists a 'muddle' concerning the Enlightenment conception of (unified) rationality. The muddle is that the historical and social circumstances in which such a notion arises are often ignored, forgotten or denied to exist. Why is it, MacIntyre asks, that in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, represents a similar contemporary attempt to undermine the notion of a 'pure', universal rationality. For Rorty, as for MacIntyre, this notion is the outcome of a series of historical events and cannot be extricated from the historical context in which it arises. Rorty (1980: 9) explicitly states that there is nothing new about this idea and that it is the message common in philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Dewey and Heidegger.



realm of practical rationality<sup>3</sup> and justice<sup>4</sup> (like morality), there is not only dissent but mere 'arguing past one another' – by assertion and counter assertion? MacIntyre formulates the Enlightenment conception of rationality when he says that:

It was a central aspiration of the enlightenment, an aspiration the formulation of which was itself a great achievement, to provide for debate in the public realm standards and methods of rational justification by which alternative courses of action in every sphere of life could be adjudged just or unjust, rational or irrational, enlightened or unenlightened. So, it was hoped, reason would replace authority and tradition. Rational justification was to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities which the Enlightenment thinkers took to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places.

(WJWR: 6)

The problem with the Enlightenment Project, according to MacIntyre, is that thinkers have always disagreed as to what precisely the above-mentioned principles are or what they could be. In fact such disagreement has grown over time.<sup>5</sup> The legacy of the enlightenment has been to provide ideal standards of rational justification that it has been unable to sustain and live up to.<sup>6</sup> In light of this, MacIntyre wants to discontinue the 'Enlightenment

---

<sup>3</sup> This is simply rationality that is applied to a context in which a rational choice must be made between alternatives.

<sup>4</sup> For MacIntyre, these two notions go hand in hand as two components that mutually constitute and refer to each other.

<sup>5</sup> Different answers as to what 'rational principles' might be have been given, according to MacIntyre (WJWR: 6), by: 1) the authors of the Encyclopedia (see chapter 3), 2) Rousseau, 3) Bentham, 4) Kant and 5) Scottish 'common sense' philosophers and their French and American counterparts.

<sup>6</sup> In anticipation of later criticisms of MacIntyre's rejection of Enlightenment ideals, it is necessary to note at this point that just because it looks like the Enlightenment Project fails in practice does not rule out the possibility that it may succeed at a later stage. MacIntyre does not make this concession at this stage, although he inexplicitly makes it in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. In this book he partly concedes that it is impossible to definitively



Project' thus described and moves towards an alternative understanding of rationality. This understanding is an attempt to re-capture that which the Enlightenment has made us blind to, namely

*a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.*

(WJWR: 7. My emphasis.)

According to MacIntyre, there are multiple rationalities competing for our allegiance. This is not to say that all traditions are equally acceptable. Not all traditions have immersed themselves in rational thinking. Enlightenment thinkers have justifiably rejected some traditions, in that they are the antithesis of reason. How then is a conception of rationality rationally justified?

MacIntyre says that his conception of rationality is essentially historical. Rational justification involves the narration of how a tradition's enquiry has developed *so far*. In other words, the level of rationality or rational development of a tradition is *relative* to its own previous development. There is no way of judging development that is not relative to the best developments achieved so far in a tradition. What counts as "best developments" is again relative to the accepted standards as to what counts as development and progress. These standards have been hammered out historically and are the best standards achieved by a tradition so far. Here,

---

rule out the plausibility of traditions rivaling the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition. This also pre-empt the ultimatum question posed in chapter 4. If there are possibilities of understanding other than those advocated by MacIntyre, why does he need to be so dogmatic as to propose an ultimatum? Another issue raised by MacIntyre's conception of the 'Enlightenment Project' is whether it really purports to be as unified (polarised) a notion as he makes it out to be.



the issue of *relativism* raises its head. Intra-paradigm rationality can only exist in the form of the extent to which a framework of thinking justifies itself against previous attempts to articulate that framework. The claims of a theory are justified by reference to its framework of thinking or first principles. MacIntyre recognises the *relativism* in rationality when he says:

But what justifies the first principles themselves, or rather the whole structure of theory of which they are a part, is the rational superiority of that particular structure to all previous attempts within that particular tradition to formulate such theories and principles; it is not a matter of those first principles being acceptable to all rational persons whatsoever – unless we were to include in the condition of being a rational person an apprehension of and identification with the kind of history whose culmination is the construction of this particular theoretical structure, as perhaps Aristotle, for example, in some measure did.

(WJWR: 8)

At this initial stage, MacIntyre seems to say that rationality is only relative to a tradition's capacity to explain its earlier self more adequately. This does not seem to help. We still need to know what the criteria are for a 'more adequate' narrative and also what is to count as a 'progressive' narrative. Otherwise, the tradition is self-justifying and question-begging. It seems to need 'external' standards by which its standards can be judged. Or are these questions a result of the remnants of Enlightenment 'propaganda'? These questions will be hammered out in the section on 'relativism'.

Let me finish off by stating a few caveats regarding MacIntyre's historical conception of rationality. MacIntyre does not claim that some claims cannot appear in different contexts. He does not claim that timeless truths cannot

---

For a critical stance on MacIntyre's notion of the "Enlightenment Project", see Robert Wokler's article, "Projecting the Enlightenment".



exist. Rather, notions like 'rationality' and 'timeless truth' are concepts with a history, concepts used in differing contexts. Rationality, says MacIntyre, is a concept with a history and as such there will be multiple rationalities as there are multiple traditions of enquiry, each with its own history. (WJWR: 8-9).

The picture MacIntyre has painted of multiple traditions with multiple conceptions of rationality and inquiry seems, so MacIntyre anticipates, to the proponents of Enlightenment reason, to be less likely to solve any issues than Enlightenment thinking. MacIntyre seems to present a fragmented world of many diverse traditions in which much disagreement is unavoidable. "Is this world not more 'muddled' than the one (world) we propose?" Enlightenment thinkers may ask. To this, MacIntyre's reply is that such 'relativism' is, and this will become clearer with further argument, the precondition for rational understanding.<sup>7</sup> (WJWR: 9-10).

### **Tradition(s) and rationality (ies)**

An exploration of the rationality of traditions requires not only intra-, but also inter-paradigmatic criteria by which the legitimacy of a tradition can be upheld. MacIntyre looks to 'foreign' traditions in order legitimate and amend one's own dear-held tradition. For MacIntyre,

there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.

---

<sup>7</sup> In "Relativism, Power and Philosophy", MacIntyre goes as far as to claim that the Enlightenment ideal of detaching oneself from one's own perspective/viewpoint – "view[ing] our own particularly modern viewpoint from a vantage point outside itself" – (MacIntyre, 1987: 404) cannot be accomplished by ideal Enlightenment rationality. It can only be achieved by recognising that which is relative to another culture, that what is untranslatable in our own language! We can only understand that which is untranslatable (and specifically *why*, culturally speaking it is untranslatable) by understanding a culture like anthropologists do – from its roots up. One needs relativism to truly understand another culture, learning its customs and language as a 'second first language'.



(WJWR: 350)

A tradition justifies itself *internally* (intra-paradigm justification) by providing rational justification for its central theses at each stage of its development. This justification is *on its own terms*. Such a tradition defines itself using its own concepts and standards. For MacIntyre, there is no set of independent, neutral standards to which a tradition can appeal to vindicate itself against others. This does not mean that issues between traditions cannot be decided<sup>8</sup>. On the contrary, for MacIntyre, it is precisely when we recognise the partly relative nature of inquiry that we can coherently choose between traditions. I call MacIntyre's understanding 'partly relative' because he does not (and cannot logically) deny that competing traditions do share some 'core' standards.<sup>9</sup> The major traditions that compete for our allegiance must have some common standards and logic. "Were it not so," says MacIntyre (WJWR: 351), "their adherents *would be unable to disagree* (my emphasis) in the way in which they do."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> However, MacIntyre is later to make remarks in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* to the effect that no tradition can ever be *definitively* vindicated or refuted. There is always the possibility, so MacIntyre allows, of a once discredited tradition vindicating itself. MacIntyre says that we can only give the best reasons *so far* for our support of a tradition. This is because (and this will be spelt out in more detail later) traditions can only vindicate themselves (or show their incoherence) *retrospectively* or historically.

<sup>9</sup> Many philosophical anthropologists have argued that there is a basic 'core' of understanding between cultures. This 'core' provides the possibility of translation and the possibility of hearing at least some of what a 'foreign' culture is saying. Many of the authors in Hollis and Lukes's collection of essays on the rationality debate, *Rationality and Relativism*, hold this view. It can be alternatively named as a "theory of commensurability or of 'bridgeheads' between worldviews or ontologies" (Masolo, 1994: 133).

<sup>10</sup> Says MacIntyre (WJWR: 4):

Aristotle argued in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* that anyone who denies the basic law of logic, the law of noncontradiction, and who is prepared to defend his or her position by entering into argumentative debate, will in fact be unable to avoid relying on the very law which he or she purports to reject. And it may be that for laws of logic parallel defenses can be constructed. But even if Aristotle was successful, and I believe he was, in showing that no-one who understands the laws of logic can remain rational while rejecting them, observance of the laws of logic is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition for rationality, whether theoretical or practical. It is on what has to be added to observance of the laws of logic to justify ascriptions of rationality – whether to oneself or to others, whether to modes of enquiry or to justifications of belief, or to courses of action and their justification – that disagreement arises concerning the fundamental nature of rationality and extends into disagreement over how it is rationally appropriate to proceed in the face of those disagreements.



The Absolute knowledge of the Hegelian system is from this tradition-constituted standpoint a chimera.<sup>13</sup> No one at any stage can ever rule out the future possibility of their present beliefs and judgements being shown to be inadequate in a variety of ways.<sup>14</sup>

(WJWR: 361)

The rationality of a tradition is called into question, according to MacIntyre, when it lacks the narrative resources to explain its own incoherences and problems. MacIntyre calls this an “epistemological crisis” – another concept he borrows from the philosophy of science. Such a crisis occurs internally i.e. when a tradition fails to make progress *by its own standards*. The successful resolution of such crises represents for MacIntyre one of the surest signs that a tradition is making progress. (WJWR: 361-362). Previous historical truths or certitudes being brought into question mark an epistemological crisis.

MacIntyre’s work on epistemological crises is being presented with the (somewhat inexplicit) intention of providing the preconditions for a rational vindication of an ancient tradition – the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition of the virtues. It is to be MacIntyre’s claim, as made explicit in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, that the last mentioned tradition is the one that best overcomes the problems generated by its predecessors. The “Enlightenment Project” fails, according to MacIntyre, because it both lacks the resources to explain its own incoherences (and specifically lands up with the “modern muddle” concerning morality – see Introduction) and does not solve its predecessor’s difficulties *in their own terms*. To return to MacIntyre’s

---

<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre here uses Richard Rorty’s pet word from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – “chimera”. The “and” in Rorty’s book tells us much of what it is about. I take it to mean, “Philosophy *is not* the mirror of nature” i.e. it cannot (re)present reality exactly as it exists. MacIntyre here wholeheartedly agrees with this point.

<sup>14</sup> Again, to pre-empt the issue of the coherence of MacIntyre’s “either/or” ultimatum, MacIntyre will get himself into trouble with this claim. If one imposes a self-reflexive criticism on this point, then MacIntyre’s cherished beliefs may be refuted (in part or in whole) at some later stage. I will later hold MacIntyre to his point and ask: why then does he need to propose a non-negotiable ultimatum if in principle it should be open to dispute? MacIntyre’s words will come back to haunt him when I take him up on this offer and reconsider the coherence of the ultimatum.



MacIntyre seems to draw on the philosophy of science to complete his account of the *internal* justification of a tradition. A tradition's truth claims can be vindicated only with regard to the possibility of their *falsification*.<sup>11</sup> A truth claim that cannot be falsified cannot be rationally vindicated.<sup>12</sup> Or rather when its proponents are unable to state the conditions under which a truth claim may be falsified, it cannot be rationally vindicated. MacIntyre's own formulation of this idea is that the test for truth is to summon up as many objections of the greatest strength possible, to a truth claim. What we can justifiably hold as true are those claims that have withstood dialectical questioning and possible objections. (WJWR: 358). Although MacIntyre says that the truths we arrive at will be the best truths proposed *so far*, he does not want to detract from the permanence and universality of such claims. The claim that a truth claim makes, is that the intellectual inadequacy of its predecessors is a situation that will never again be repeated, no matter how extensive and exhaustive the enquiry is (WJWR: 358). Even though rational enquiry is perspectival in that theories will differ from tradition to tradition, traditions will tend to recognise what is common between them. It is simply that in the development of traditions that common characteristic, if not universal patterns, will appear (WJWR: 359).

For MacIntyre, first principles are justified dialectically and historically. "They are justified insofar as in the history of the tradition they have, by surviving the process of dialectical questioning, vindicated themselves as superior to their historical predecessors" (WJWR: 360). First principles cannot be self-sufficient, self-justifying epistemological first principles. There cannot be a final truth in which the mind is adequate to its objects:

---

<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre never, as far as I can recall, uses the word "falsification" in this context.

"Falsification" does, I believe, best encapsulate what he is getting at.

<sup>12</sup> Many of Freud's theories seem to be 'undisprovable' or not open to falsification, as such they cannot be called "scientific".



explanation of the vindication of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition: what would the solution to an epistemological crisis require?

New theories and concepts that meet three precise requirements, says MacIntyre, will have to be introduced:

1. New theories and concepts must furnish a solution to the previously insoluble problematic that constituted the epistemological crisis.
2. They must be able to explain why the tradition initially lapsed into incoherence or sterility.
3. Tasks 1. and 2. must be fundamentally continuous with the conceptual scheme of the tradition in epistemological crisis. In other words, there cannot be a 'total revolution' in thought. Some common 'core' or epistemological 'bridgehead' must remain. (WJWR: 362).

What then, according to MacIntyre, is the nature of these 'solutions' to epistemological crises? The 'new' conceptual structures in a tradition that has successfully passed through an epistemological crisis will be richer than previous structures, escaping their limitations.<sup>15</sup> They will thus in no way be derivable from the original structures – imaginative conceptual innovation will have had to occur. It is only in *retrospect* that one can see the logic behind a solution to an epistemological crisis. Consider MacIntyre's example of an epistemological crisis in science. It concerns Boltzmann and Bohr.

Boltzmann derives, in 1890, a number of paradoxes from accounts of thermal energy. These accounts are framed by classical mechanics. These paradoxes cannot be solved by the traditional scheme, which is to result in an epistemological crisis. At the same time, Bohr proposes his theory of the internal structure of the atom. The point is that the scientists in that day do

---

<sup>15</sup> This is precisely why MacIntyre advocates Aquinas over its two main predecessors, namely the Aristotelian and Augustinian traditions. Aquinas provides the resources to blend the latter two traditions. Without Aquinas' scheme both the Augustinian scheme and the Aristotelian scheme cannot coherently exist side by side (WJWR: 363).



not recognise that there is a crisis between Boltzmann's and Bohr's theories. Bohr's theory is only recognised as a solution to a crisis in retrospect. It is only when the content of quantum mechanics is hammered out that the crisis becomes visible. Says MacIntyre:

The power of quantum mechanics lies not only in its freedom from the difficulties and incoherences which came to afflict classical mechanics but also in its ability to furnish an explanation of why the problematic of classical mechanics was bound in the end to engender just such insoluble problems as that discovered by Boltzmann... To have passed through an epistemological crisis successfully enables the adherents of a tradition to rewrite its history in a more insightful way.<sup>16</sup>

(WJWR: 363)

### **The relativist challenge**

The preceding passages represent MacIntyre's attempt to balance out the subjectivism and relativism implied in the *intra-paradigm* conception of rationality. On this conception, the relativist may argue that if a tradition can only look to its own internal resources, it will always vindicate itself, since it itself provides the standards of internal justification (WJWR: 364 and 352-354). MacIntyre claims to refute this type of relativism by showing how a tradition can develop rationally *inter-paradigmatically* following an epistemological crisis. He says that:

Every tradition, whether it recognises it or not, confronts the possibility that at some future time it will fall into a state of epistemological crisis, recognisable as such by its own standards of rational justification,

---

<sup>16</sup> An interesting parallel with this idea is that most historical concepts gain much of their meaning retrospectively. When, for example, does the First World War (the actual events that took place) become known as "World War One" (the historical narrative on the events that took place)? The answer is only after the completion of the Second World War! Shortly after the period 1914-1918, the war is rather known as, inter-alia, "the war to end all wars" and in the inter-war period, simply as "the Great War".



which have themselves been vindicated up to that time as the best to emerge from the history of that particular tradition.

(WJWR: 364)

MacIntyre tries to avoid the relativistic overtones of what Colby (1995: 54) calls MacIntyre's "constitution thesis", the thesis that

There is no standing ground, no place for inquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some tradition or other... There is no evaluatively neutral understanding of rationality; even conceptions of rational justification are historically transformed. (Colby paraphrasing MacIntyre, 1995: 54).

MacIntyre then tries to avoid relativism, i.e. the idea that there are simply many rival traditions, each with its own internal standards of rationality, by identifying rationality with *progressiveness in crisis resolution*.

The first question to pose to MacIntyre is whether the "constitution thesis" is not relativistic in that it could be inherently conservative. Why should a tradition fall into an epistemological crisis on its own terms? Surely it can avoid crises by simply continuing to (self) justify its own theses?<sup>17</sup> Colby (1995: 55) similarly raises two points in this regard. Firstly, each tradition must fix for itself and itself alone, the criteria for what is to count as an epistemological crisis. How then do we know when a real epistemological crisis occurs? Secondly, a tradition must likewise decide on the criteria for deciding what is to count as a 'progressive' solution to the crisis. Colby's first objection is not particularly hard-hitting. MacIntyre himself gives many

---

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre says that he is not concerned with traditions that have not developed to the point at which epistemological crises have become a possibility (WJWR: 366)



examples in which sufficiently self-reflective paradigms experience crises on their own terms.<sup>18</sup> Colby's more interesting point is his latter.

The problem with Colby's criticism of the constitution thesis is that he comes across as a hard-nosed 'absolute' rationalist. Just because MacIntyre proposes that there is 'no tradition/context-independent way of viewing the world' does not mean there is either absolute epistemological relativism or absolute, universal rationality. Contra Colby<sup>19</sup>, MacIntyre does not rule out the possibility of universal truths<sup>20</sup>. The issue is far subtler than Colby allows. That Colby's absolute, context-free rationality is what is needed to choose between traditions, is simply wrong<sup>21</sup>. Such a notion has been well refuted.<sup>22</sup>

Colby's 'good side' is simply to point out that the apparent success of a tradition in overcoming an epistemological crisis can only ultimately be judged *relative* to the tradition concerned. It is true that it is also judged relative to its rivals, but this is done only in terms of its own standards.

MacIntyre seems correct to propose that that epistemological crises can arise on a tradition's own terms. This has historical support, as does the idea that traditions will not always have the resources to solve their own problems. He adequately handles the relativist charge that because traditions have their

<sup>18</sup> Another example is how Galileo and Newton overcome the crises inherent in the medieval physics of nature (WJWR: 365).

<sup>19</sup> 1995: 55

<sup>20</sup> WJWR: 9

<sup>21</sup> The notion of universal, contextless rationality proposes to be outside of all tradition. The rationalist in this sense faces the same predicament as the *perspectivist*. MacIntyre (WJWR: 367) says that, "The person outside of all traditions lacks sufficient rational resources for enquiry and *a fortiori* for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred... To be outside of all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution[.]"

<sup>22</sup> For a thorough debunking of these notions see Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. A caveat to the definitive refutation of 'absolute' rationality must be made however. I give this caveat as a parallel to the case MacIntyre makes in "Relativism, Power and Philosophy" against the definitive refutation of relativism:

Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than in the course of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once.

(RPP: 385)



own internal accounts of rationality, they cannot challenge or defeat or be defeated by other traditions. The type of relativism that he falls prey to is, following Colby's article, that he cannot tell us that we can know *for sure* when we are making progress in rational enquiry. If MacIntyre cannot do this, how can he rationally propose that the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition *must* be revived? Surely it must be revived because it holds better promise of "progress"?! Yet "progress" on whose terms? "Progress" can only be progress on Aristotelian-Thomist terms. Sure, MacIntyre convinces us that the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition represents progress - but only if we are Aristotelian-Thomists. Relativising progress will simply not do when we have to decide between multiple traditions and rationalities all competing for our allegiance.

Colby is wrong to assume that without the "neutral criteria of rationality" (Colby, 1995: 60), each tradition is simply self-justifying and that there is neither victory nor defeat nor any compelling reasons to change from one tradition to another.<sup>23</sup> It does not follow that traditions cannot dialectically encounter each other or that real argumentation cannot occur. Contra Colby, MacIntyre's 'relativist' account of rationality is not simply question begging or incoherent<sup>24</sup>. MacIntyre's rationality thesis certainly survives the major relativist challenge, but at a cost.

MacIntyre wants to make a claim, available to all rational persons, that we simply *must* re-appropriate the ancient Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition. For MacIntyre it is simply *the* rational thing to do. Yet MacIntyre holds that we cannot be *sure* that it is the rational thing to do, since it may be proved unwise retrospectively. MacIntyre cannot have it both ways. He cannot simultaneously relativise epistemology (knowledge about knowledge) and

---

<sup>23</sup> It is ironic that MacIntyre warns against such terms as "victory" and "defeat". For him, they represent 'absolute' Enlightenment thinking. The irony is that he does exactly this when proposing his "either-or" ultimatum in *After Virtue*.

<sup>24</sup> Colby never explicitly refers to it thus.



make universal epistemological claims. On this point, I agree with Colby (1995: 60-61). MacIntyre cannot coherently maintain that to

genuinely...adopt the standpoint of a tradition thereby commits one to its view of what is true and false and, in so committing one, prohibits one from adopting any rival standpoint.

(WJWR: 367)

MacIntyre's main thesis with regard to the nature of rationality is that rationality is only available to us in and through traditions (WJWR: 369). For MacIntyre, the possibility of re-appropriating another 'foreign' or 'ancient' tradition therefore lies for him in the attempt to firstly understand that tradition. This understanding is essentially steeped in language, since there is no pre-conceptual way of understanding the world. The precondition for understanding another tradition is to adequately understand its language and its linguistic community. It is only when we understand traditions' languages from the inside-out that that we can ultimately choose between them.

### **The preconditions for understanding a 'foreign' tradition**

The major point of understanding another tradition for MacIntyre is that the other tradition may offer, on our own standards, superior resources for understanding, explaining and solving our problems (WJWR: 370). This is precisely what MacIntyre claims for the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition.

The first precondition for understanding the last-mentioned tradition and 'other' traditions in general, as competing with and rival to ours (the post-Enlightenment moral tradition or whatever it happens to be) is that the traditions understand each other to a significant degree. Without a 'common core' of understanding, there are simply multiple, totally incommensurable schemes (schemes with 'no common measure') that 'talk *past* one another' rather than 'talk *to* one another'.



MacIntyre uses, inter-alia, Donald Davidson's account of translatability to hammer out the very basics of being able to talk *to* one another. Following Davidson, MacIntyre says that translatability entails (at least partial) commensurability. Such commensurability is *assumed*.<sup>25</sup> In Davidson's words, "finding the common core is not subsequent to understanding, but a condition of it." (WJWR: 370).

MacIntyre focuses on the understanding of traditions that are very different to our own, as is the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition. To understand such a tradition requires the simultaneous understanding of both culture and language. These activities are *not* independent for MacIntyre (WJWR: 374). Because language is steeped in culture (and there is a hermeneutic interplay between the two), one first has to be initiated into the foreign tradition as a native child might be.

MacIntyre follows anthropologists' lead by saying that in order to truly understand a tradition, one must understand the culture 'from the inside out' – as a native does. One has to metaphorically become a child again, learning the language and culture as a first language. In our case, we can only learn the language as a "second first language".<sup>26</sup>

For MacIntyre, 'deep' translation (i.e. translation that can generate meaning as opposed to the translation that occurs in, for example, travelers' phrase

---

<sup>25</sup> For a very interesting and detailed debate of the preconditions for the possibility of translation see Hollis and Lukes' (eds) *Rationality and Relativism* and Masolo's critical narrative on the debate in chapter 6 of *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. The conclusion that Hollis and Lukes come up with in commenting on the essays is that the "bridgehead" of common rationality is both given a priori and assumed.

<sup>26</sup> The idea of learning a culture as a native does is taken from Winch's famous article, "On understanding a primitive society" (1964). This article represents Winch's culminated thoughts on an earlier work, *The idea of a social science* (1958). According to A.A. van Niekerk (1992: 43), Winch's ideas that there are not trans-cultural standards of rationality, that we live in "different worlds" and that the social sciences are doomed to relativism, are nonsense. For a thorough criticism of Winch's denial of trans-cultural standards of rationality, see Van Niekerk (1992: 39-44). It is only if we live in completely different worlds that that



books<sup>27</sup>) does not occur by matching sentences with sentences. This is not how a child learns a language, for it possesses no prior sentences of its own! (WJWR: 374). To truly understand the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition, we must learn it from the roots up or as a "second first language". The big question to pose to MacIntyre here is whether it is possible, given the preconditions for understanding, to really understand another tradition by learning its language as a "second first language". The exposition of Gadamer's preconditions for understanding that is still to come will shed some light on this.

How is it possible that we twenty-first century beings can transform ourselves into native inhabitants of the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition? Even though this is no longer a 'living' tradition, MacIntyre says that it has sufficient texts for us to become "surrogate" inhabitants (WJWR: 374). The test, says MacIntyre, of whether one has understood a tradition well is whether one can pass as for example, as a Thomist<sup>28</sup>, improvising what Aquinas might say in a situation. The judges of this test can only be the best contemporary scholars on Aquinas. Knowledge of this tradition can only be judged *relative* to the highest authority on Aquinas – an authority that is the best so far, in accordance to Thomist Standards.

An important characteristic of a person who understands a tradition well, says MacIntyre (WJWR: 375), is that he understands what is *untranslatable* from one language to another and why. This ability results from the adequate learning of a culture from the roots up. In some cases, choosing between one phrase and another means choosing between two (at least partly incommensurable) conceptual schemes and two different ways of life. Consider an example, given by MacIntyre, regarding the significance of language in that age-old feud between the English and Irish.

---

we need to learn foreign traditions as a native might do, even though this is, I will show, following Gadamer, also nonsensical when one considers the preconditions for understanding.

<sup>27</sup> This example is taken from RPP: 391

<sup>28</sup> This is my own fictitious example.



There are two rival place names – “Doire Columcille” in Irish and “Londonderry” in English. The former refers to the identity of a place given to it by an Irish and Catholic community since it became St. Columbia’s oak grave in 564. The latter refers to the identity of a place given to it by an English and Protestant community in the seventeenth century. To use either of the rival names is to deny the legitimacy of the other. “Londonderry” cannot be translated by either “Doire Columcille” or “St. Columbia’s oak grave”. There are no such names in English. To use either presupposes allegiance to one way of viewing the world or another way of viewing the world. There simply is not reference to one and the same place in the absence of communal backgrounds. MacIntyre says:

So the conception of pure reference, of reference as such, arises as the artifact of a particular type of social and cultural order, one in which a minimum of shared beliefs and allegiances can be presupposed.

(WJWR: 379)

The type of relativism generated by this predicament is not seen as a stumbling block to rational enquiry for MacIntyre. It is indeed a necessary precondition for rational enquiry. It is precisely by the grace of relativism that we see other traditions in a ‘new light’:

[W]hen we learn the languages of certain radically different cultures, it is in the course of discovering what is untranslatable in them that we learn not only how to occupy alternative viewpoints, but in terms of those viewpoints to frame questions to which under certain conditions a version of relativism is the inescapable answer. And in so doing *we are also able to learn how to view our own peculiarly modern standpoint from a vantage point outside itself.* (My emphasis).

(RPP: 404)



Overcoming relativism, for MacIntyre, involves embracing it. The attempt to do away with all relativism itself falls prey to a more dangerous type of relativism. What the languages of modernity presuppose is that its audience does not possess *any* framework of common, shared belief (WJWR: 384-385). The texts typical of the languages of modernity translate other languages at the cost of rendering them at least partly unintelligible to the adherents of those other languages. It is not simply that the languages of modernity distort by translating out of context, says MacIntyre (WJWR: 385), but moreover that this is invisible to those whose first language is one of the internationalised languages of modernity. For MacIntyre, it is a defining belief of modernity that there is nothing that is not translatable into its internationalised languages. The principle of untranslatability is unintelligible to the adherents of modernity or put otherwise, it is a philosophical fiction.

What MacIntyre's preconditions for understanding wants to allow can be seen as a direct attack on Post-Enlightenment modernity or on modernity as the heir of the Enlightenment. Another defining belief of modernity, according to MacIntyre (WJWR: 385), is that it believes that it can understand anything, no matter how alien. As such, the translation characteristic of modernity generates a misunderstanding of tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Even the postmodernists make a meal of trying to get at an adequate account of rationality and translation. MacIntyre takes Roland Barthes to task for describing texts as detached from their original context. For Barthes, this is what texts always are. For MacIntyre, this is an account of texts from a peculiarly postmodern stance. Says Barthes (1966: 56):

---

<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre says, concerning our (western, post-Enlightenment) education, that it

is not and cannot be a reintroduction to the culture of past traditions but is a tour through what is in effect a museum of texts, each rendered contextless and therefore other than its original by being placed on a cultural pedestal.

(WJWR: 386)



[T]he work is without circumstance and it is indeed perhaps what defines it best: the work is not circumscribed, designated, protected, directed by any situation, no practical life is there to tell it what meaning to give it... in it ambiguity is wholly pure: however extended it may be, it possesses something of the brevity of the priestesses of Apollo, sayings conforming to a first code (the priestess did not rave) and yet open to a number of meanings, for they were uttered outside every *situation* – except indeed the situation of ambiguity[.]

In contrast to both modernists and postmodernists, MacIntyre proposes that progress in rationality can only be made when we discover what is *untranslatable* between languages and why. Discovering the inaccessible and untranslatable requires, to recapitulate, two stages (WJWR: 387):

1. Acquiring a second first language by learning a culture 'from the roots up'.
2. Learning what cannot be translated from the second first language into the first first language.

MacIntyre's scheme of translation and rationality is essentially one of 'openness'. He says that

the only rational way for the adherents of any tradition to approach intellectually, culturally, and linguistically alien rivals is that one allows for the possibility that in one or more areas the other may be rationally superior to it in respect precisely of that in the alien tradition which it cannot as yet comprehend.

(WJWR: 388)

MacIntyre rages against what I take to be the 'homogenising' effect of the Enlightenment. We have, ever since the Enlightenment, says MacIntyre (RPP: 409), been too quick to congratulate ourselves on our success in discovering that *they* (those foreign and alien cultures) are just like *us*. We



have imputed our standards to them, thus making their behaviour intelligible not by their standards, but by ours. The problem with post- Enlightenment rationality is that it is too self-justifying. It precludes the two most important elements of rational justification, the possibility of *falsification* and the possibility of *untranslatability*. MacIntyre says that

[o]nly those whose tradition allows for the possibility of its hegemony being put in question can have rational warrant for asserting such a hegemony. And only those traditions whose adherents recognise the possibility of untranslatability into their own language in use are able to reckon adequately with that possibility.

(WJWR: 388)

MacIntyre's preconditions for understanding and translation argue for an account of practical rationality. This practical rationality is needed in order to choose between competing traditions. It is the resource necessary to show why the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition should be resurrected above its rivals. This account will be spelled out further in the final section on, "the preconditions for rationally choosing between traditions" and in the rationale behind the resurrection of the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition as exposed in chapter 3. In his argument thus far, MacIntyre has argued for liberation from Enlightenment rationality and its corresponding incoherent anti-relativism.<sup>30</sup> MacIntyre's (re-) uniting of tradition and rationality proposes that

rationality requires a readiness on our part to accept, and indeed to welcome, a possible defeat of the forms of theory and practice in which it has up till now been taken to be embodied within our own tradition, at the hands of some alien and perhaps even as yet largely unintelligible tradition of thought and practice; and this is an

---

<sup>30</sup> It is precisely this anti-relativism that makes plausible those genealogical theories that identify every form of rationality with some contending form of power (RPP: 409).



acknowledgement of which the traditions that we inherit have too seldom been capable.

(RPP: 409)

MacIntyre's argument on the preconditions for understanding ends at a point at which it has much in common with Hans-Georg Gadamer's conclusions (although there are similarities throughout). It can be assumed that MacIntyre has an extensive knowledge of Gadamer, extending at least as far back to his 1976 article, "Contexts of interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*". The purpose of the following section on Gadamer's preconditions for understanding is threefold. Firstly, it serves as a critical reflection on and amendment to MacIntyre's thought. Secondly, it updates and expands on MacIntyre's initial encounter with Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Thirdly, it deals with the question that this chapter tries to answer in part, namely, "Is it coherent to re-appropriate an ancient moral tradition?"

### **Gadamer's conditions under which meaningful forms are understood<sup>31</sup>**

The previous sections can be summed up into a number of claims that MacIntyre makes on how we can rationally understand, in order to possibly vindicate or re-appropriate, another tradition:

- I. An epistemological crisis occurs within a tradition when it falls into incoherence on its own terms. When a tradition lacks the resources to explain its own faltering condition, it looks to other traditions to solve its crises on its own terms.

---

<sup>31</sup> The nature of Gadamer's hermeneutics has to be carefully articulated so as not to distort his claims. Gadamer's theories are in essence *descriptive*. He describes what is the case when we understand (well).

- II. Another tradition can only be engaged in dialogue by learning its culture and language. It's culture must be learned as a child learns its native culture, but in this case as a second first language.
- III. By learning to understand another tradition, one discovers what is untranslatable between the two. By learning why it is untranslatable, one is enabled to find a viewpoint disengaged from oneself, yet not 'a view from nowhere'. It is presumably from this 'disengaged view' that one can begin to decide between competing traditions.
- IV. A tradition partly<sup>32</sup> defeats another by providing the resources both to explain why the other has collapsed into incoherence and to present solutions to those incoherences (again acceptable to the inhabitants of the defeated tradition on their own terms).
- V. A tradition partly vindicates itself against others to the extent to which it can provide the resources to deal with its own epistemological crises.

Imagine that MacIntyre puts forward these theses to Gadamer. Perhaps the resulting 'dialogue' goes a little something like this:

On my first point, MacIntyre claims that a tradition facing epistemological crisis falls into incoherence *on its own terms*. Gadamer agrees with this in the sense that, when we understand well, we always do so initially from within our own tradition (paradigm/horizon). This is a consequence of the "hermeneutic circle" present at the birthplace of understanding. We can understand other traditions, but only as initially integrated into our own horizon. MacIntyre agrees with Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice and tradition.

Gadamer (1975: 81-82) holds the Enlightenment responsible for both the negative connotations of the notion of prejudice and the reluctance to take recourse to the authority of tradition. For Gadamer, the Enlightenment sees

---

<sup>32</sup> MacIntyre maintains that some 'core' common to both the victor and defeated must remain. The revolution cannot result in a radical, "new" tradition.



prejudice and tradition as the anti-thesis of reason and method.<sup>33</sup> Gadamer's rehabilitation of "prejudice" and "tradition" involves three steps, the first two of which concern solely the former:

1. Gadamer adapts Husserl's insight that all understanding of an object is understanding of that object *as something*. In other words, we project meaning on an object that is not contained in perception itself.<sup>34</sup>
2. Gadamer follows Heidegger in arguing that interpretive projections of meaning are rooted in the situation of the interpreter. For Heidegger, the fore-structure of understanding is such that even before I consciously begin to interpret an object, I have already placed it in a certain context (*Vorhabe*), approached it from a certain perspective (*Vorsicht*) and conceived of it in a certain way (*Vorgriff*). There is no neutral vantage point from which to determine the 'real' meaning of an object. It's meaning is determined by context or what Dilthey calls one's "life-relations". (Gadamer, 1975: 232-240).
3. Points 1 and 2 raise the spectre of subjectivism, for is there any difference between adequate understanding and personal prejudice? In response to this Gadamer says that prejudice and tradition are not simply 'mine' or

---

<sup>33</sup> According to Gadamer, from the perspective of the Enlightenment, prejudice arises from two sources: firstly, from relying from traditional views and not using one's own reason and secondly, from using reason over-hastily and unmethodically (Warnke, 1987: 75). Even though in some (or even many) cases, tradition, prejudice and superstition can be seen as the anti-thesis of reason, this does not negate, for Gadamer, their fundamentality in understanding.

<sup>34</sup> Consider Warnke's (1987: 75-76) example of a three-dimensional object. For Husserl, even though I cannot see all sides at once, I still intend each side as a side and project the idea that all sides are present although this cannot be based on perception alone. For Husserl, I do not first have a sense experience and then interpret it in a certain way. Rather, I anticipate the object's three-dimensionality in perceiving it. See Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (especially investigation 1) and his *Ideas: General introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (especially chapter 3). For Gadamer, the perception of an object involves the intentional act of meaning giving. Perception is always prejudiced by a vantage point:

There is no doubt that seeing as an articulated reading of that which is there looks away, as it were, from much that is there so that for sight it is simply no longer there. Equally, however, it is also led by its anticipations to read in what is absolutely not there. ...Pure seeing and pure hearing are dogmatic abstractions that artificially reduce the phenomenon. Perception includes meaning.

(Gadamer, 1975: 81-82)



'yours' but belong to a historical tradition into which we are 'thrown'. The standards by which we measure are not subjective, but inter-subjective.

To return to my first claim on MacIntyre's claims, MacIntyre seems right, in the light of Gadamer, to claim that a tradition must understand and be understood *on its own terms*. For Gadamer, tradition has a force over us that in a sense cannot be escaped. We can reject it, but only on its own terms. In reacting to or rejecting a tradition, we remain conditioned by it. Gadamer calls this "effective history" or *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

On my second point, MacIntyre claims that another tradition can only be engaged in dialogue by learning its language and culture. This is done by learning that culture as a native child might, but in this case as a second first language. MacIntyre's notion of learning a culture 'from the inside out' as a "second first language" seems wholly dubious and counterfactual to Gadamer. Even though Gadamer stresses that one's situatedness does not prevent one from understanding foreign traditions (in fact it is the precondition for such understanding), he still disagrees with the extent to which MacIntyre proposes to 'leave' one's tradition. Gadamer is somewhat more conservative than MacIntyre when it comes to leaving the grip of one's tradition. Gadamer asks why it is necessary for MacIntyre to refer to a "second language" as a "second first language".<sup>35</sup> For Gadamer's more conservative hermeneutics, the former title is more appropriate when referring to the acquisition of a 'foreign' language. Gadamer's criticism of MacIntyre suggests that MacIntyre sometimes claims very strong normative force for tradition, most notably when demanding that we reclaim the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition, and sometimes claims weaker force, as in the possibility of escaping our tradition by learning a "second first language". For Gadamer, MacIntyre embraces a similar perspectivism, conservatism and subjectivism concerning the

---

<sup>35</sup> Bear in mind, this "dialogue" is constructed by the author and bear's his opinions on Gadamer, not Gadamer's.



preconditions for understanding, but then stretches the possibility of leaving one's prejudices too far.

This last point comes to the fore in my third point. One of MacIntyre's most powerful and potentially controversial theses, as contained in "Relativism, Power and Philosophy"<sup>36</sup>, is that by discovering what is untranslatable from one language into another and why, one is able to find a viewpoint disengaged from oneself. Gadamer thinks that it is sensible for MacIntyre to propose that this viewpoint is not a 'view from nowhere'.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, he surprisingly agrees with MacIntyre that one can attain a position that is disengaged from oneself. For Gadamer, however, this position is the result of the dialogic nature of understanding and the aspects of *the truth* that are revealed in this understanding and not specifically the result of understanding why *untranslatability* occurs.

When we understand, according to Gadamer, we do so from our own horizon. The subjectivism in this is countered by engaging in dialogue with the other by anticipating the potential truth of what the other is saying (the anticipation of completeness). What results from the dialogue is that both parties are given insight into aspects of the truth. The "synthesis" of both initial positions results in a "higher truth" than was contained in the initial positions. For Gadamer (1975: 331):

What steps out in its truth is the *Logos*, which is neither mine nor yours and which therefore so far supersedes the subjective opinions of the discussion partners that even the leader of the discussion always remains the ignorant one.

Both Gadamer and MacIntyre thus hold onto the situatedness of truth and understanding. Whilst both make an exceptional case for this, they still seem

---

<sup>36</sup> See p 404.

<sup>37</sup> To use one of Nagel's pet phrases.



to be caught in the grips of the very thinking they want to forget – the chimera of absolute truth or as Gadamer calls it, the “*Logos*”. I have already taken MacIntyre to task for both relativising epistemology and claiming that his view is simply right or the truth (even though he denies the ‘absoluteness’ of this at times). Similarly, Habermas takes Gadamer to task for claiming to get at *the truth* whilst holding onto a ‘conservative’ account of reason. For Habermas, Gadamer’s account of understanding does not adequately account for the influence of ideology<sup>38</sup>. As such it lacks the resources to explain how ideology is discovered and overcome:

One could argue that too many women took the possible truth of this consensus [Gadamer’s dialogic conception of understanding] too seriously for too long since it served to mask a hierarchical power structure. In approaching traditional views of women hermeneutically, in trying to make sense out of them on their own grounds and incorporate their truth into their own lives, women did so at their own expense.

(Warnke, 1987: 112)

My fourth point again concerns the problem of ideology. MacIntyre’s claim is that a tradition defeats another by providing the resources both to explain why the other has collapsed into incoherence and to present solutions to those incoherences (again acceptable to the inhabitants of the defeated tradition on their own terms). Gadamer disagrees with MacIntyre that one tradition defeats another per se. MacIntyre’s use of ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ too closely mirrors the type of Enlightenment thinking that both thinkers want to reject. For Gadamer, what results from the dialogic nature of understanding is not merely the subjective or inter-subjective dogmatism of one’s

---

<sup>38</sup> However, Habermas’s own attempt at creating “unconstrained communication” is not unproblematic. Habermas constructs the “ideal speech situation” as a standard against which Gadamer’s consensus with tradition is to be measured. What Habermas aims at is a criterion for determining when a traditional consensus is void of force and coercion. Habermas leaves himself open for the criticism that such a situation is a fiction with its own history and



conversation partner or the possible dogmatism involved of always accepting authority on one's own terms, but it is the emergence of elements of the *Logos, the Truth*. MacIntyre speaks of "victory", "defeat", "falsification" and "truth", yet on the other hand eventually denies the possibility of absolute truth. MacIntyre says that although universal claims can be made, they are only such that they are the best standards that have emerged *so far*. MacIntyre's thesis precluded the possibility of knowing *for sure*<sup>39</sup> one is right and knowing for sure when one's base thinking is "systematically distorted". Although this is problematic, I don't think MacIntyre would have it otherwise. MacIntyre's main general problem is that without a "neutral" conception of reason and truth, he cannot coherently make some of the claims he does.<sup>40</sup>

My fifth point is that MacIntyre claims that a tradition partly vindicates itself against others to the extent to which it can provide the resources to deal with its own epistemological crises. MacIntyre says that in order for this to happen a tradition must have vibrant and imaginative visionary thinkers like Aquinas. For Gadamer, understanding is more inter-subjective and relies less on the imaginative genius of individuals (although this may be a necessary element of understanding). Understanding is spawned from dialogic partners, but if it is to be *true understanding*, it supersedes their initial insights and the sum of their combined insights.

The second problem for MacIntyre is: "how does one know when one has a *true* or *real* epistemological crisis?" This question is similar to the one that Habermas asks Gadamer: "how does one know when one's understanding is free of ideology?" Habermas says that Hermeneutics can work, but only if in a context devoid of ideology and force. Albrecht Wellmer (1974: 47) agrees with Habermas when he says:

---

circumstance. It seems unlikely that his equally lofty ideals can be maintained. For the details of Habermas's "unconstrained communication" see Warnke (1987: 129-134).

<sup>39</sup> It must be noted that there is no unproblematic way of stating the preconditions for truth, as is testified to by, for example, Habermas's problematic "idealised speech situation" in which rational participants can hammer out the truth free of significant prejudice and ideological distortion.



The Enlightenment knew what hermeneutics forgets – that the dialogue which, according to Gadamer, we “are” is also a context of power and precisely for this reason no dialogue. ... The universal claim of the hermeneutic approach [can only] be sustained if one assumes that the context of the tradition as the locus of possible truth and factual agreement is, at the same time, the locus of factual untruth and continuing force.

Similarly, for MacIntyre, there is the concern that our epistemological crisis may simply be *our parochial* crisis. The spectre of relativism raises its head again. It is not clear that the problem of ideology can always be rooted out of an epistemological crisis, as it may be partly constitutive of that crisis. As Warnke says on the Gadamer/Habermas debate, which can be applied to MacIntyre:

The crucial point here is that ideology is not the same as prejudice, that there is a difference between calling a perspective ideological and recognising its social and historical situatedness. What makes a claim ideological is not merely its connection to an unarticulated source, or its reliance on unexpressed norms and assumptions. Ideological claims do not simply leave the assumptions behind them implicit; they rather articulate them in such a way that it becomes difficult to disentangle the warranted part of the claims from the unwarranted.

(Warnke, 1987: 115)

MacIntyre cannot coherently propose that a tradition will fall into a true epistemological crisis, devoid of force and ideology. Similarly he cannot propose that the resources it uses to resolve that crisis will be free of force and ideology. While I agree with MacIntyre that any understanding must be

---

<sup>40</sup> This is also Colby's (1995: 55) claim.



situated, I find fault with the way in which he, like Gadamer, equates "ideology" and "prejudice".

We have considered MacIntyre's preconditions for understanding. What remains to expose is the ultimate goal behind MacIntyre's exposition of the preconditions of understanding. The goal of understanding how traditions are understood serves the goal of ultimately choosing between them and as MacIntyre says in his ultimatum, choose we must.

### **The preconditions for rationally choosing between traditions**

MacIntyre says that even before the contemporary debate on practical rationality is entered into, opponents of liberalism (as the inevitable result of the Enlightenment Project) are forced into an antagonistic stance. Liberalism, as MacIntyre understands it, appears in many guises in contemporary debates. These guises enable it to reformulate quarrels against liberalism to quarrels *within* liberalism. Everything is put into doubt, says MacIntyre, except the very radical tenants of liberalism. The problem and quest for opponents of liberalism (such as MacIntyre), is to create the institutional space in which real debate can occur, debate that is not predisposed to favour liberalism and debate that does not have a predetermined outcome. These are the problems for the person MacIntyre primarily addresses *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* to. (WJWR: 392-393).

MacIntyre is primarily addressing the person who has not yet given his allegiance to a particular coherent tradition of enquiry. Such a person is confronted by the traditions exposed by MacIntyre as well as others. 'How is it rational to respond to them, and how is it rational to choose between them?' asks MacIntyre. MacIntyre's initial response to the claim a tradition makes on us is to say that we respond depending on who we are and how we understand ourselves. This constitutes, as we have seen, the "conservative" and "subjectivist" part of Gadamer's hermeneutics of understanding. Many



philosophers recoil from such a notion because they have by and large presupposed

what in fact is not true, that there are standards of rationality, adequate for the evaluation of rival answers to such questions, equally available, at least in principle, to all persons, whatever tradition they may happen to find themselves in and whether or not they inhabit any tradition.

(WJWR: 393)

MacIntyre says that the problems of practical rationality are, once we give up the chimera of neutral rationality, not the same sets of problems for all persons. What these problems are, how they are formulated and resolved will differ according to social and historical circumstance. (WJWR: 393).

How does it make sense for a person to occupy another tradition, according to MacIntyre? He says that even though we cannot literally occupy other traditions, we can do so by acts of empathetic conceptual imagination. This enables one to enter into discourse with another tradition. Next, MacIntyre floods the reader with another series of rants on how modernity makes inadequate claims to the preconditions for rational choice. MacIntyre criticises the pragmatist who reacts to the failure of the Enlightenment Project by concluding that because there are no neutral standards of justification, there is no rational way of choosing between traditions and that every scheme of belief that goes beyond pragmatic necessity is *equally unjustified*. Such a person cannot belong to a community of discourse and therefore must be disqualified from participating in such discourse.<sup>41</sup> This type of relativism is most prominent in the thought of the very proponents of extreme anti-relativism who use the “internationalised languages of modernity”. MacIntyre

---

<sup>41</sup> This is, I propose, the fate of Richard Rorty. Rorty untethers his writing from any (recognisable) conception of “truth” but still wants to be taken seriously. He in effect renders himself incapable of discourse.



calls the last-mentioned the “alienated... languages of everywhere and of nowhere” (WJWR: 396).

MacIntyre continues on the warpath against modernity long into his discussion on the preconditions for rationality and rationally choosing between traditions. Those who only see tradition and schemes of belief as characterised by arbitrary will are deprived of what tradition affords. This view is for MacIntyre an impoverished one. To those who oppose tradition and reason, MacIntyre says that

from an Aristotelian [point of view] they have refused to learn or have been unable to learn that one cannot think for oneself if one thinks entirely by oneself, that it is only by participation in rational practice-based community that one becomes rational.<sup>42</sup>

(WJWR: 396)

MacIntyre notes that he is stereotyping the modern person to a large degree. What is more common in contemporary life, says MacIntyre, is that people live between traditions adapting fragments of many traditions. They live “betwixt and between” traditions, accepting each only piecemeal. At this point, MacIntyre implicitly<sup>43</sup> takes the reader back to the “modern muddle concerning morality” as first exposed in *After Virtue*:

---

<sup>42</sup> For MacIntyre, it is necessary to re-enter the Aristotelian-Thomist morality and rationality schemes in order to restore and make coherent moral theory. MacIntyre asks himself whether it is indeed at all possible to enter in a social scheme of belief that no longer exists. He answers this question affirmatively. Even though such a scheme no longer exists in practice,

This does not mean that one cannot be an Aristotelian without membership in an actual *polis*, or that one cannot be a Humean outside the specifically hierarchically ordered relationships of eighteenth-century England. Were this so, the study of Aristotelian or Humean theory could only be of antiquarian interest. What this does mean is that it is only insofar as those features of the *polis* which provide an essential context for the exercise of Aristotelian justice and for the action-guiding and interpretive uses of the Aristotelian schema of practical reasoning can be embodied in one’s own life and that of one’s time and place that one can be an Aristotelian.

(WJWR: 391)

<sup>43</sup> In the preface to *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre states that his aim is that it should be possible to read this book without any prior knowledge of *After Virtue*. The former



This type of self has too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formulated alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically, brings to its encounters with the claims of rival traditions a fundamental incoherence which is too disturbing to be admitted to self-conscious awareness except on the rarest of occasions. ...This type of fragmentation appears in divided moral attitudes expressed in inconsistent moral and political principles, in a tolerance of different rationalities in different milieus, in protective compartmentalization of the self, and in uses of language which move from fragments of one language-in-use through the idioms of internationalized modernity to fragments of another.

(WJWR: 397)

How, asks MacIntyre, does the above person enter into dialogue with other traditions of enquiry? Such a person has to dialectically test the theses proposed by competing traditions by testing them against the theses that one brings to the encounter. One has to learn the idioms of each tradition in order to 'translate' them into the idioms of the other traditions. One looks to other traditions to better characterise and solve one's own inconsistencies. It seems like for MacIntyre, one of the most important characteristics of a mature tradition claiming legitimacy is the possibility of its *negation* or *falsification*<sup>44</sup>:

---

book should, according to MacIntyre, be able to 'stand alone'. Any comparison between the two thus contains my opinions.

<sup>44</sup> MacIntyre himself never, to the best of my knowledge, uses these terms. They seem close to Popper's definition of a scientific theory. According to Popper, a theory is only scientific in that it can be falsified. This is to say that its protagonists must furnish the conditions under which it can be considered false and rejected. For a more detailed analysis see Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations*. An example of an *unscientific theory* is that of Freud's psychoanalysis. The conditions under which such theories can be refuted are never given and thus seem true *whatever the circumstances*.



One of the marks of any mature tradition of rational enquiry is that it possesses the resources to furnish accounts of a range of conditions in which incoherence would become inescapable and to explain how these conditions would come about.

(WJWR: 398)

The major point of most of MacIntyre's writings (and this is especially marked in "Relativism, Power and Philosophy") is that rational enquiry must begin from particular circumstance and situatedness. This is what the modern liberal culture forgets:

Abstract the particular theses to be debated and evaluated from their contexts within traditions of enquiry and then attempt to debate and evaluate them in terms of their rational justifiability to *any rational person*, to individual as abstracted from their particularities of character, history, and circumstance, and you will thereby make the kind of rational dialogue which could move through argumentative evaluation to the rational acceptance or rejection of a tradition of enquiry effectively impossible.

(WJWR: 398-399)

This is why reason breaks down today. In the modern liberal university, says MacIntyre, although we no longer believe in absolutely independent and neutral rationality, we act *as if* this is the case (WJWR: 399). We are committed to holding a "fictitious objectivity" where none exists. This has harmed the natural sciences most of all, says MacIntyre, because they have lost touch with the traditions that render them rational. The result of this is that there is "an *apparent* [my emphasis] inconclusiveness in all argument outside the natural sciences" (WJWR: 400). This can only be altered, according to MacIntyre, by sufficiently subverting or circumventing the liberal mode of thought so as to challenge its hegemony. Only then, says MacIntyre (WJWR: 401), will it be possible to speak in a way that will not always already

involve conflict. Until this subversion of liberalism occurs, MacIntyre notes that he is forced to justify the Aristotelian-Thomist position by presenting it as antagonistic and superior to other traditions.

This is where, MacIntyre concludes in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, we have to begin. To vindicate the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition in a culture of institutional liberalised reason, MacIntyre has to exhibit how the former contains resources for its own enlargement, correction and defense. He has to also show that *so far* the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition has confirmed its rationality in encounters with other traditions. What MacIntyre does not get clear on, and this is one of the main elements of Colby's criticism, is that it seems that MacIntyre justifies the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition to Aristotelian-Thomists.<sup>45</sup> This type of self-justifying relativism haunts *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

At this stage, MacIntyre has shown us where rational enquiry into vindicating the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition can start:

The rival claims to truth of contending traditions of enquiry depend for their vindication upon the adequacy and the explanatory power of the histories which the resources of each of those traditions in conflict enable their adherents to write.

(WJWR: 403)

The question we have been answering, "Is it coherent to argue for the re-appropriation of an ancient moral tradition?" now can no longer be asked in generality. Following MacIntyre, we must more closely examine the coherence of his re-appropriation of tradition as specifically typified by the Thomist tradition.

---

<sup>45</sup> See the section on "The relativist challenge".



## 3

**The rationality of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition****Three rival versions of moral enquiry –Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition**

The previous section concluded that MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* ended at the point at which we must reform the first part of our twofold question to MacIntyre. Given MacIntyre's preconditions for the rational vindication of an ancient moral tradition, we must move from the general question being asked, "Is it coherent to argue for the appropriation of an ancient moral tradition?" to a more specific question. MacIntyre realises that the time has come to stop speaking in generalities. The argumentation necessary to vindicate his re-appropriation of the Aristotelian-Thomist moral scheme must be located, so MacIntyre finds, within the historical rivalry contained in what he proposes to be the three rival versions of moral enquiry, namely Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition.

MacIntyre only wants to argue that the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition is the most coherent position on moral theory explicated *thus far*. As such it must be vindicated against its rivals. The "truth" of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition can only be demonstrated by showing its superiority to other schemes.

For MacIntyre, "neutral rationality" is a myth. Rather, there are different rationalities contained within incommensurable traditions (traditions that have *no common measure*). The charge that MacIntyre faces is the charge, particularly from the Genealogist, that because neutral rationality is a myth, there is no way of justifying one incommensurable framework over another. MacIntyre maintains that one can rationally choose between incommensurable (moral) frameworks.

According to Fuller (1998: 28), MacIntyre uses the same method of testing moral schemes that Paul Feyerabend applies to incommensurable scientific frameworks in the latter's *Against Method*. Fuller says that Feyerabend argues that one cannot test incommensurable theories *directly*. This is to say one cannot test them against the world as it stands or against each other without running into problems of circularity. However, Feyerabend says that one can test incommensurable theories *indirectly*:

There is only *one* task that we can legitimately demand of a theory, and it is that it should give us a correct account of the world, i.e., of the totality of facts *as constituted by its own basic concepts* ... is it not reasonable to assume that a point of view, such as the point of view of classical mechanics, that has been found wanting in various respects and that gets into difficulty *with its own facts* ... cannot have entirely adequate concepts? Is it not equally reasonable to try to replace its concepts with a more successful cosmology? ... Incommensurable theories, then, can be *refuted* by reference to their own respective kinds of experience, i.e., by discovering the *internal contradictions* from which they are suffering ... [But] their *contents* cannot be [directly] compared.

(Feyerabend, 1975: 248)

Fuller (1998: 28-29) finds this method similar to the ancient procedure of argument, *reductio ad absurdum*. This procedure entails showing that one's opponent's position is inconsistent and problematic *on its own terms*, whilst showing that one's own position is free from inconsistencies.

In arguing for the re-appropriation of the Aristotelian-Thomist moral scheme, and later for the re-appropriation more specifically of Thomism in *Three Rival*



*Versions of Moral Enquiry*<sup>1</sup>, MacIntyre implicitly asks himself the question, "Is Thomism the most coherent moral position achieved thus far in moral theorising?" This question has two inter-related components regarding MacIntyre's procedure, which form the backbone of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*:

- MacIntyre attempts to prove the greater coherence of Thomism over Encyclopedia and Genealogy.
- MacIntyre likewise hopes to prove the incoherence of Encyclopaedia and Genealogy (Fuller, 1998:29).

How are these two components to be proved? In the former case, MacIntyre says that:

Is there any way that one of these rivals might prevail over the others? One possible answer was supplied by Dante: that narrative prevails over its rivals which is able to include its rivals within it, not only to retell their stories as episodes within its story, but to tell the story of the telling of their stories as such episodes.

(TRVME: 80-81)

In the latter case, to pre-empt the sections on Genealogy and Encyclopaedia, MacIntyre says:

So we also need to proceed by raising critical questions for encyclopaedists and genealogists, not on our own terms, but in theirs ... Just such a problem is raised for the genealogist, I shall suggest, by his or her conception of personal identity. And in the encyclopaedist's idiom no expression invites such questions more obviously than 'morality' itself.

---

<sup>1</sup> For MacIntyre, Thomism now represents the highest, most coherent moral scheme achieved thus far. While Aristotle is the hero of *After Virtue*, Aquinas takes over at the helm in *Whose*

(MacIntyre, 1991: 173)

The project ahead of MacIntyre to vindicate Thomist moral theorising seems to be a thorny, stony road that twists towards an ever-receding horizon. There is no way of definitively, a la Enlightenment thinking, vindicating Thomism once and for all. This is not the purpose of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. Its purpose is, says MacIntyre, to be part of a greater struggle *in progress* between rivals (TRVME: 215). This conflict is not terminated nor should it be thought of as ultimately terminable in the 'Enlightenment' sense of the possibility of finding *the* solution to end all problems. MacIntyre sensibly leaves the possibility of the *falsification* of his theory that Thomism is the most coherent moral theory when he says that:

It is of course possible that genealogy can discover within itself, or at least from sources not alien to it, the resources to provide a solution to [its] problems ... It is therefore the case that in the tripartite hostilities between the heirs of the encyclopedia, post-Nietzschean genealogy, and Thomistic tradition neither argument nor conflict is yet terminate. These are struggles in progress, defining in key part the contemporary cultural milieu by the progress of their dissensions. ... To contribute to writing the history of these unfinished debates is also inevitably to participate in them.

(TRVME: 215)

MacIntyre makes the concession that his three rival versions of moral enquiry are parochial to his own thought. He tells us in, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (10-11), that his exposition does not cover the options of Judaism, the Prussian tradition and Islam:

There are other bodies of tradition-constituted enquiry which not only merit attention in their own right but whose omission will leave my



argument significantly incomplete is undeniable ... Judaism, within the relationship of the devoted study of the Torah to philosophy engendered more than one tradition of enquiry ... The whole Prussian tradition in which public law and Lutheran theology were blended, a tradition which Kant, Fichte, and Hegel tried but failed to universalize ... Islamic thought requires treatment ... also the narratives of such sharply contrasting traditions of enquiry as those engendered in India and China.

Yet is it necessary for MacIntyre to cover all options? Yes, in the sense that it will make his narrative more complete, more coherent. No, in the sense that he purports that is impossible to get "*the answer*" by covering *all* options. Where MacIntyre will find himself in hot water is that he claims in *After Virtue*, following his stark ultimatum, that one *must* simply follow Aristotle over Nietzsche, that there is *no other option*. This is further explicated in chapter 4.

MacIntyre's moral task turns out to be a mammoth one. From its humble beginnings in *A short history of Ethics*, it becomes a raging torrent that increasingly seems to take on a life of its own. MacIntyre realises this when he jokes that he is involved in "a project described by one of my colleagues as that of writing *an interminably long history of Ethics*[]" (MacIntyre, 1991: 63).

Let us begin then on the twisty path that MacIntyre lays before us. Following MacIntyre's account of rationality, one must first be initiated into a tradition in order to see its (possible) rationality in retrospect. Let us enter into the scheme that MacIntyre advocates- in order to critically evaluate- the rationality of the Thomist tradition. The first necessary step in this direction must be to get clear in our minds precisely what MacIntyre means by "Encyclopaedia", "Genealogy" and "Tradition".

Encyclopaedia is that mode of moral enquiry that directly represents the ideals of the Enlightenment. As such it is, at least since *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's chief bugbear. What then is the Enlightenment? The Enlightenment represents the culmination of the growth of modern science and the belief that it is through the powers of reason, especially scientific reason, that we get at what is really out there. It represents the movement from *mythos* to *logos*, from darkness and dogma to reason and enlightenment. There are three main and linked principles at the heart of the Enlightenment:

- 1) Through the powers of reason, and especially scientific reason, humanity will be able to penetrate to the ultimate truth about reality and society. The rational order of the human mind is capable of reflecting the rational order of the universe and of reorganizing society along more rational lines.
- 2) Through the dedicated and impartial use of such reason, all human beings (or, indeed, all rational beings) will be able to achieve agreement or consensus about the truth, since everyone shares the same rationality.
- 3) What chiefly prevents such consensual rational agreement about the truth are a number of Baconian-style idols: superstition, dogma, bigotry, prejudice, custom, tradition, habit, delusive hopes and fears. All these function as blemishes on the clear mirror of reason, cobwebs which cloud the view and which need wiping away in order to see the truth clearly. They need to be expunged from rational enquiry.

(Fuller, 1998: 14-15)

For MacIntyre, Encyclopaedia represents a specific type of "reason" and a correspondingly specific version of moral enquiry that is inspired by the Enlightenment:



The encyclopaedist's conception is of a single framework within which knowledge is discriminated from mere belief, progress towards knowledge is mapped, and the truth is understood as the relationship of *our* knowledge to *the* world, through the application of those methods whose rules are the rules of rationality as such. ... Correspondingly in ethics there is on the encyclopaedist's view a set of conceptions of duty, obligation, the right, and the good which have emerged from and can be shown to be superior to – in respect both of title to rational justification and of what is taken to be genuinely moral conduct – their primitive, ancient, and other pre-Enlightenment predecessors.

(TRVME: 42)

For MacIntyre, "encyclopaedia" means a belief in a universally shared rationality that can progress towards truth in all spheres of life including ethics and epistemology (knowledge about knowledge). For MacIntyre, this belief is typically characterised by the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (TRVME: 24).

It is against this conception of reason that MacIntyre's philosophy holds the greatest beef. MacIntyre seems to hold Genealogy in greater esteem than Encyclopaedia in that the former's job is fundamentally that of 'unmasking' the other – showing its pretensions and incoherence.<sup>2</sup> Genealogy, for MacIntyre, represents the attempt to undermine Encyclopaedia. The latter results directly from the "Enlightenment Project", while the latter is inextricably embedded in the former. Genealogy is parasitic on the "Enlightenment Project" in that it is a reaction against it.

Genealogy for MacIntyre is typified by Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, published in 1887. MacIntyre says that while the Encyclopaedist tries to



replace the Bible as *the* canonical book, the genealogist tries to discredit the very notion of a canon. (TRVME: 25).

According to Fuller, the history of genealogy can be traced back to its beginnings in Hume's attacks on the Enlightenment notion that reason can reveal the truth about reality without recourse to the "idols" of "tradition" and "prejudice". MacIntyre's criticism of "pure reason" is a contemporary type of Hume's original position. MacIntyre's basic criticism of the Enlightenment Project pervades his work and is colourfully summarised thus by Fuller (1998: 17-18):

The fundamental problem, then, is that the premises of rational arguments can only be derived from outside reason (understood as obedience to the laws of logic) itself. *The premises can only come from experience as it is filtered through such things as prejudice and tradition.* Ironically, the unwanted lackeys that Enlightenment had ordered out of the front door of the house of reason – Tradition and Prejudice – are now seen by MacIntyre to have sneaked in again by the back door and to have commanded the central place by the hearth. Or to make the metaphor more accurate, Tradition and prejudice had in fact never gone away. It was merely that the Enlightenment was too short-sighted to see them.

MacIntyre's criticisms it seems are at the contemporary end of a history that proceeds from Hume to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, to Hegel (and two contemporary philosophers who directly build on Kant, C.S. Pierce and Karl Popper), to Schopenhauer, finally culminating in Nietzsche.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche confronts the "three Enlightenment ideals" head-on:

---

<sup>2</sup> The irony concerning the Genealogical stance here is that it tries to unmask the "untruth" of Enlightenment pretensions by using the Enlightenment ideals – the very ideals it purports to reject- of getting at what is really out there, at what is really going on.



1. Reason cannot reveal to us the truth about reality
2. There is no consensus in reason
3. Such things as prejudice, tradition, custom, habit, delusive hopes and fears lie at the very heart of reason, inspiring it to adopt numerous different strategies and perspectives, "lying fictions" which only ever interpret the world, never uncovering any original text. (Fuller, 1998: 21).

MacIntyre sees Nietzsche's thought, particularly *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, as a prototype of Genealogy. MacIntyre defines Genealogy thus:

Nietzsche, as a genealogist, takes there to be a multiplicity of perspectives within each of which truth-from-a-point-of-view may be asserted, but no truth-as-such, an empty notion, about *the* world, an equally empty notion. There are no rules of rationality as such to be appealed to, there are rather strategies of insight and strategies of subversion.

(TRVME: 42)

We have already seen how MacIntyre applauds Nietzsche for unmasking the pretensions of the Enlightenment Project and its corresponding claims regarding moral theory. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre regards Nietzsche to be *the moral philosopher*, whilst condemning his ranting and ravings on what morality should become after his genealogical 'unmasking'. To recap, where MacIntyre departs from Nietzsche is that the latter says that because that there is no neutral objectivity, no one moral perspective is any more justifiable than any other is. Nietzsche would certainly call MacIntyre's nostalgic longing to revive Thomism in moral theory as an inauthentic and hypocritical attempt to ensure the tyranny of slave-morality over master-morality. Nietzsche would clearly call MacIntyre's preaching about the Virtues

---

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the position achieved by each of these thinkers and how later thinkers build on their ideas see Fuller (1998: 19-21).



a sick, deprived attempt to tether the greatness of the *Übermensch*! MacIntyre makes an explicit retort to what he considers to be a 'sick soul' and trades blows with Nietzsche thus:

The answer is: with what Aquinas says about the roots of intellectual blindness in moral error, with the misdirection of the intellect by the will and with the corruption of the will by the sin of pride, both that pride which is an inordinate desire to be superior and that pride which is an inclination to contempt for God. Where Nietzsche saw the individual will as a fiction, as part of a mistaken psychology which conceals from view the impersonal will to power, the Thomist can elaborate out of the Materials found in the *Summa* an account of the will to power as an intellectual fiction disguising the corruption of the will. The activity of unmasking is itself to be understood from the Thomist standpoint as a mask for pride.

(MacIntyre, 1991: 147)

This brings us to exposing our third concept, MacIntyre's use of "Tradition". For MacIntyre, the "charter document" of "Tradition" is the encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris* published by Pope Leo XIII in 1876, four years after the Ninth Edition commenced publication. This encyclical letter advocates Aquinas as having the resources to radically criticise the conception of rationality dominant in the nineteenth century. It also advocates Aquinas's ability to preserve and justify the canonical status of the Bible as distinct from, yet hegemonic over, all secular enquiry. (TRVME: 25). In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, "Tradition" is best equated with the "Aristotelian-Thomist Tradition" or the "Thomist Tradition" where Aquinas amends Aristotelian moral theory to the highest point achieved thus far.

What then do "Aristotelianism" and "Thomism" mean? This question is pertinent because MacIntyre does not advocate all that both these thinkers propose. In *After Virtue*, for example, MacIntyre claims that Aristotle is



'simply wrong' (to use my own words) with regard to his disregard for women and slaves. Here, MacIntyre seems to forego "Tradition" and take recourse to "Enlightenment ideals". Fuller (1998: 23-26) analyses MacIntyre's use of "Aristotelianism" and "Thomism" by suggesting four possible interpretations:

- 1) A *maximum* interpretation, according to which MacIntyre accepts as true everything that Aristotle and Aquinas say.

This is nonsensical because of MacIntyre's explicit distancing from Aristotle's comments on slaves, women and productive labourers. Similarly, Fuller doubts whether MacIntyre advocates much of what Aquinas says about angels and what both thinkers say about physics and the natural sciences. Such dismissals can only, following MacIntyre himself, detract from the overall coherence of such schemes.

- 2) A *minimum* interpretation, according to which all MacIntyre wants to re-appropriate, is a generic form of "human flourishing" and the "common good".

Again, this is nonsensical in that even if liberalism cannot provide such ideals, there are many encyclopaedic theories that do, namely Rousseau's General Will theory, the Hegelian doctrine of the state, Marxism and Socialism.

- 3) An interpretation whereby MacIntyre thinks that Aquinas provides a definitive set of moral first principles which need only be applied to modern circumstance.

This is false in the sense that MacIntyre denies that any principles are *beyond refutation*.<sup>4</sup> It is true in the sense that Aquinas gives us the best (most coherent) moral account achieved thus far (TRVME: 142).

---

<sup>4</sup> One wonders how MacIntyre can maintain this claim whilst believing that some of the first principles in the Bible are fundamental and beyond refutation and falsification. What

- 4) An interpretation whereby MacIntyre holds that Aquinas's first principles are open to revision and improvement.

This is true in the sense that just as Aristotle was improved upon so Aquinas too can be improved upon. It is not only that Aquinas's principles should be applied to contemporary contexts, but that it is a matter of modifying those principles themselves.

The crucial point here that Fuller fails to mention is MacIntyre is ambiguous with regard to whether canonical first-principles, such as given by Aquinas and the Bible are open to *radical* refutation and questioning. On the one hand, MacIntyre says that *all* theories should be open to refutation, yet in his faith he holds that first-principles cannot be open to refutation- they are given to us in faith. Surely, the idea that there are fundamental first-principles represents precisely what the "Enlightenment Project" holds dear- principles that are bedrock knowledge, knowledge that is absolute. MacIntyre might be able to set the muddle straight if he clearly separates the modes of rational (empirical) justification applicable to knowledge and epistemology and the mode of justification appropriate to faith. Faith has to fall outside of MacIntyre's somewhat 'scientific' conception of rationality in that, for example, the conditions under which the existence of God may be disproved cannot be stipulated.

Fuller makes a different point regarding interpretation 4). He says MacIntyre makes Thomism, as a tradition or "Tradition", too "open-ended" and "fuzzy" when he (MacIntyre) makes first principles always open to "continuing elaboration and reformulation". This "fuzziness" definitely counts against the coherence of MacIntyre's project:

---

MacIntyre fails to distinguish here is the difference between knowledge based on faith (faith) and knowledge based on empirical observation and the methods of justification appropriate



Let us be as clear as possible about the general nature of that project: it is to argue for the greater coherence of Thomism (as the culmination of the Aristotelian tradition) compared to Encyclopaedia and Genealogy. But since the rival frameworks of Encyclopaedia and Genealogy are themselves presumably traditions of "continuing elaboration and reformulation", it seems that we are in danger of ending up in the awkward position that one inevitably open-ended and fuzzy position is trying to argue for its superiority over two other open-ended and fuzzy positions. In other words, it is no longer clear *what* exactly is being argued against *what*, since the *content* of each of the three positions, looked at over the long term, becomes vague and vacuous.

(Fuller, 1998: 26)

Fuller does make one concession to MacIntyre concerning the above argument. MacIntyre's project can be seen as *more intelligible* if we keep in mind the "modest enterprise" that he is attempting, namely doing the best he can with the resources he has so far. It seems MacIntyre will never escape this type of relativism, nor would he have it otherwise. Just before we are too harsh on MacIntyre, Fuller reminds us of the words of J.M. Keynes, "In the long run, we are all dead" (Fuller, 1998: 26). The problem with the type of relativism espoused by MacIntyre is that it renders incoherent any of his claims that too closely resemble the "Enlightenment Project's" conceptions of "truth", "reason" and "rationality". MacIntyre acknowledges, in *After Virtue*, that his stance is at once on the back foot in that it is "quixotic" and exists in the social and conceptual realm of the 'enemy', namely Liberalism and its Enlightenment ideals.

Let us not, however, condemn MacIntyre before considering his arguments for Tradition and his arguments against Encyclopaedia and Genealogy. It is after all only fair that we interrogate him on his own terms. It is on his own

---

to both.



terms that MacIntyre insists that we must enter into a 'foreign' tradition *on its own terms*.

### **Tradition versus Encyclopaedia**

MacIntyre's arguments against Encyclopaedia pervade his work throughout. As such they are difficult to pinpoint and summarise. They extend back to at least *After Virtue* and are later made explicit in part in chapter VIII of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. MacIntyre's main point in the latter work is contained in the chapter title, namely that the superstition of modernity is that it claims "enlightened morality" (TRVME: 170).

The Encyclopaedic stance claims that moral theory is a case of finding universal timeless maxims that are accessible in theory to every rational person. This type of thinking still pervades modern academia and needs to be exorcised (TRVME: 171). We still behave as if there is general agreement on the academic project of the Ninth Edition. That such agreement is lacking is clearly exposed to us in *After Virtue's* "modern muddle concerning morality". This muddle is, to recap, that we have inherited a set of classical virtues at odds with contemporary theories of the self and at odds with contemporary views on science and rationality.

Linked to this is the faulty belief, says MacIntyre, that there is total conceptual commensurability in practice. This belief means that we, rational beings, can understand any claim to truth and any foreign culture no matter how foreign they are to us. This results in, in my opinion, a homogenising effect: we discover that *they* behave just like *we* do.

MacIntyre's arguments for partial incommensurability and against *total* commensurability are directed chiefly at Donald Davidson's work.<sup>5</sup> For

---

<sup>5</sup> For the original argument see WJWR chapter 19. For commentary on the debate between MacIntyre and Davidson see Fuller (1998: 75-116). See also RPP for a practical example of



Davidson, in practice, we can understand any 'foreign' culture. Davidson thus has a "strong" conception of rationality.<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre opts for a "weaker" notion of rationality. For MacIntyre, Davidson suffers from remnants of the Ninth Edition when he says on the latter:

What would be required, on this contemporary view, for a conclusive termination of rational debate would be an appeal to a standard or set of standards such that no adequately rational person could fail to acknowledge its authority. But such a standard or standards, since it would have to provide criteria for the rational acceptability or otherwise of any theoretical or conceptual scheme. But ... there can be no such standard; any standard adequate to discharge such functions will be embedded in, supported by, and articulated in terms of some set of theoretical and conceptual structures.

(TRVME: 172)

What Encyclopaedia forgets, according to MacIntyre, is its own historical situatedness. The attempt to find timeless universal reason is not inherently "rational" in MacIntyre's use of word. On dismissing universal timeless reason, Genealogists and MacIntyre agree. Where Genealogy goes wrong according to MacIntyre is that it supposes that because reason is not timeless, there is no rational way of deciding between traditions and paradigms.

It is only because of the Encyclopaedist's emphasis on universal, timeless reason that he needs to seek timeless moral rules that apply to "man-as-such", man deprived from the social context that he is bound up in. MacIntyre sensibly maintains the social situatedness of man, his life and his values and that the attempt to discover timeless universality is itself historical and situated, when he says in *After Virtue*:

---

the effects incommensurability can have on a person who inhabits the "borderline situation" in which one has lingual allegiance to two radically different cultures and sets of beliefs.



The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity ... The fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularities of those forms of community. Without those moral particularities to begin from *there would never be anywhere to begin* [my emphasis]; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal consists. Yet particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such, whether in its eighteenth century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytical philosophies, is an illusion with dangerous consequences. When men and women identify what are in fact their partial and particular causes too easily and too completely with the cause of some universal principle, they usually behave worse than they would otherwise do.

(AV: 221)

And again in a 1991 interview:

[There is] pretension involved in the unwitting elevation of the culturally and morally particular to the status of what is rationally universal. So, for example, the name of that cultural artefact of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'the individual', whose social and moral relationships were held to be merely contingent and incidental to his rational being and who has within himself... the resources to criticize those relationships in the name of rights or utility,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Davidson's article "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme".



was systematically confused with human nature as such. 'Man', wrote Nietzsche, 'does *not* pursue happiness; only the Englishman does that'.

(MacIntyre, 1991: 190)

MacIntyre is particularly hard on Encyclopaedia as representing the ideals of the "Enlightenment Project". In *After Virtue*<sup>7</sup>, MacIntyre says that the latter *had to fail* (specifically with regard to *justifying morality*) given its own incoherent project. In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre makes the same claim for the failure of Encyclopaedia as typified by the Ninth Edition:

Judged by its own standards and in its own terms, the project of the major contributors of the Ninth Edition failed; and in the failure of those contributors and their readers to break out of their own self-protective academic rhetoric in a way that would have enabled them to perceive the emerging defects of their enterprise, they failed twice over [!]

(TRVME: 189)

Where MacIntyre's criticism of Encyclopaedia ends, namely where the notion of universal, timeless reason is thoroughly discredited, is where his criticism of Genealogy begins. Where the genealogist sees this point as the stage at which one cannot rationally decide between paradigms, MacIntyre holds that this is precisely the stage at which one can start to vindicate paradigms. In my opinion, and here I agree with Fuller (1998: 30), MacIntyre quite successfully shows fundamental incoherences in the Encyclopaedic stance. His criticisms on Genealogy, I propose, are not as comprehensive and hard-hitting. This is perhaps because he favours the way in which Genealogy, and Nietzsche in particular, 'unmasks' and ridicules the pretensions of Encyclopaedia and the "Enlightenment Project" in general. Nietzsche is after

---

<sup>7</sup> AV chapter 5

all (presumably barring MacIntyre himself!) *the* moral philosopher for MacIntyre.<sup>8</sup>

### **Tradition versus Genealogy**

MacIntyre's first criticism of Genealogy concerns its incoherent use of identity – personal, intellectual and moral. Concerning identity, Genealogists typically do one of two things, according to Fuller (1998: 31):

1. They commit a fallacy similar to that of the Encyclopaedist. They believe they can stand as individuals outside of the identities provided by tradition and community and that they can, as a result, play with, mix and discard traditions at will.
2. They alternatively regard identity as a perspectival mask that they can don and later discard. As such, they ignore their social situatedness and create the identity they want to assume at any given time.

In either case, the problem for the Genealogist is that, for MacIntyre, they do not have a sufficient sense of personal continuity to carry through with their project. I assume that Fuller is referring chiefly to Foucault in the first point and Nietzsche in the latter.

MacIntyre's beef with Foucault<sup>9</sup> restates a well-known criticism on the latter. In *L'Archeologie du Savoir* (The Archaeology of Knowledge), Foucault makes the individual a function of the nature of the discourse rather than vice versa (TRVME: 206). In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and more specifically in, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault creates an all-encompassing monster called "bio-power" which *creates* the subject. The problem is that he in essence *dissolves* the subject, as we know it, but still wants us to reason and deal with the phenomenon. The question

---

<sup>8</sup> AV: 108

<sup>9</sup> See TRVME: 206-208



to ask to Foucault is twofold: "who is this "us" (since the subject no longer exists)" and "why bother to understand or 'fight' against "bio-power" or do *anything* for that matter?" Foucault's problem is twofold: his genealogy lacks the conceptual resources to formulate the problems *he* generates, let alone deal with the problems themselves. A self-reflexive criticism does many harms to the coherence of Foucault's work and is one type of criticism that Genealogy often does not stand up well to.<sup>10</sup>

More generally, MacIntyre puts his own criticisms of Foucault's continuation of the Nietzschean project thus:

Yet now the question arises as to whether even Foucault's partial implementation of the program may not have revealed that the successive strategies of the genealogist may not inescapably after all involve him or her in commitments to standards at odds with the central thesis of the genealogical stance. For in making his or her sequence of strategies and unmasking intelligible to him or herself, the genealogist has to ascribe to the genealogical self a continuity of deliberate purpose and a commitment to that purpose which can only be ascribed to a self not to be dissolved into masks and moments, a self which cannot be conceived as more and other than its disguises and concealments and negotiations, a self which just insofar as it can adopt alternative perspectives is itself not perspectival, but persistent and substantial. Make of the genealogists' self nothing but what genealogy makes of it, and that self is dissolved to the point at which there is no longer a continuous genealogical project.

(TRVME: 54)

Another of MacIntyre's criticisms on Genealogy is again well known. It is simply that the Genealogist has to use that traditional discourse of logic and

---

<sup>10</sup>For an excellent critical interpretation of Foucault's treatment of the self see Dreyfus and Rabinow's book, *Michel Foucault Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, especially chapter



metaphysics that he wants to repudiate. Logic is simply a mask that the Genealogist temporarily wears and then discards. As such, says MacIntyre, there is no victory for the genealogist that is not temporary. (TRVME: 206).

The problem with this criticism is that it can be applied to MacIntyre with good effect. In the *Preface* of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre himself takes on the role of Genealogist in the sense of trying to unearth the "modern muddle concerning morality" that the common man cannot recognise. MacIntyre himself admits that he is 'always on the back foot' and in antagonistic stance to the contemporary mode of parlance- liberal, "Enlightenment" individualism. Why does MacIntyre find it a problem that the genealogist's victory is temporary? MacIntyre's own claim is that the victory of Thomism (assuming its coherence and the incoherence of its rivals) is temporary- it is the best claim *so far*. The possibility of its future *falsification* (in terms of its (in)coherence) must be left open. Nietzsche would certainly, I propose, see MacIntyre's reclaiming of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition in moral theory as a fiction and a mask donned by MacIntyre.

Finally, for MacIntyre, the genealogist is caught up in a self-referential paradox concerning "truth" (Fuller, 1998: 32). Those who, in the Nietzschean tradition, abandon "truth" seem to fall into incoherence. They often walk the precarious tightrope of disowning "truth" as *we* Westerners know it (as *some* type of *correspondence* to reality), but still want to be taken seriously. The question is, "why should we take such persons seriously?" and what could "seriously" entail?

Richard Rorty is a good example of a thinker who discards "truth" as we know it or alternatively, proposes a conception of truth that is so alien to "us" that we cannot make sense of it. By untethering himself from "truth", Rorty in effect makes himself incapable of argumentation (or perhaps better, incapable of being taken *seriously*) or alternatively, sometimes gets caught



out unwittingly using the traditional notion of “truth” that he refers to as a “chimera”.

### **Tradition vindicated?**

MacIntyre’s twofold criteria for the vindication of Tradition/Thomism, we have seen, is that it must be coherent on its own terms and that it must be more coherent than Encyclopaedia and Genealogy. To conclude this chapter, we must then (on MacIntyre’s own terms) ask two questions:

1. Is Thomism coherent?
2. Is Thomism more coherent than Encyclopaedia and Genealogy?

On the first question, MacIntyre’s entire works are pervaded by evidence for the comprehensiveness of Thomism in providing a rich account of moral life. His chief argument is that the Thomist tradition represents the pinnacle of achievement in moral theory. Every subsequent theory is a degeneration of the greatness achieved by Aquinas.

In my opinion, MacIntyre’s claim that Thomism is coherent is quite plausible. There is always the worry that moral positions may always lead to incoherence and contradictions or that Emotivism may in fact be true because it is a fact of life. MacIntyre cannot remove the first worry altogether (definitively) and would not want to- his moral quest is more modest than this. It seems likely that recourse to a teleological scheme will restore consensus to moral theory, but the question remains is whether this is what we moral theorists want or should want. On the latter worry, MacIntyre convincingly shows how Emotivism arises. Yet why does MacIntyre want to restore order and rationality to ethics? Is this not to fulfill the Enlightenment ideal of gaining such order and rational consensus? MacIntyre seems to reject Enlightenment ideals when it suits him to do so and rejects them when it suits him to do so. Is this really the way that one wants to defend his



nostalgic longings for antiquity? What MacIntyre forgets at crucial times in his argumentation is the very social situatedness that he chides other philosophers for ignoring- he forgets that he always has, following Gadamer's preconditions for understanding, one foot in the "Enlightenment Project"!

If MacIntyre can clear up the incoherence in his position on Thomism that I have noted and any incoherence within Thomism itself (a specific treatment of Thomism falls outside the scope of this thesis), then Thomism can well be shown to be coherent. The problem of relativism concerning the justification of any scheme is also a problem that MacIntyre never effectively resolves. MacIntyre's account of Aquinas (and the preconditions for rational justification in general) is question-begging in that if it is found to be faulty, MacIntyre thinks that he can simply say that it is in need of amendment *on its own terms*. How then, can Aquinas really be refuted if MacIntyre fundamentally believes in him? It seems unlikely that MacIntyre would really (fundamentally/radically) turn on Aquinas or the Bible for that matter.

On the second question, "Is Thomism more coherent than Encyclopaedia and Genealogy?" MacIntyre gives telling criticisms on the former in particular. It is quite possible that one can answer the second question affirmatively. The problem here is the nature and status of MacIntyre's claim of "greater coherency". The problem of relativism raises its head again here. MacIntyre does not adequately deal with the conservative nature of his enquiry. If Thomism is only "more coherent" than (relative to) two *less* coherent schemes, is there not always the possibility that this will always be the case for the *Thomist*?<sup>11</sup> Again, MacIntyre proposes that the partial falsification of Thomism is possible *in theory* by surely denies this possibility by his *practice*.

MacIntyre also does not make enough of the implications of his admittance of leaving out of traditions other than the abovementioned, namely, Judaism,

---

<sup>11</sup> Colby (1995: 60) also makes this point.



the "Prussian tradition", Islam, India and China.<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre theoretically accepts the possibility that one of them is more coherent than Thomism, yet chooses, perhaps because of his smug belief that Thomism is better than rival schemes, to ignore them as an ostrich buries its head in the sand in order to escape a predator. MacIntyre can only say that he has dealt with Genealogy and Encyclopaedia because of his tradition/education/upbringing (and he would not have this otherwise), but yet claims so much normative force for Thomism. This inconsistency reaches 'fever pitch' in the next chapter, chapter 4. Here MacIntyre simply (incoherently) *demands* that we take recourse to the Aristotelian-Thomist Moral Tradition<sup>13</sup>. Why does he make this demand in *After Virtue* when he says in, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, that

It is therefore the case that in the tripartite hostilities between the heirs of Encyclopaedia, post-Nietzschean genealogy, and Thomistic tradition neither argument nor conflict *is yet terminated*. *These are struggles in progress...*

(TRVME: 215. My emphasis)

---

<sup>12</sup> See MacIntyre's list of traditions that he has not yet dealt with in WJWR: 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> See *After Virtue*, chapter 9.

## 4

**Nietzsche or Aristotle? – An Ultimatum**

MacIntyre is an advocate of the idea that to truly understand a tradition/paradigm/scheme, one must be initiated into it at root level. It is only in *retrospect* that one sees the sense in a scheme. So it is with understanding the nature of God and the nature of the Bible and so it is with understanding ethical traditions. The previous three chapters represent our *critical initiation* into the coherence of MacIntyre's re-appropriating of an ancient moral scheme. The findings in those chapters show, by and large, that an ancient moral scheme can be re-appropriated if MacIntyre more fully spells out the implications of Gadamer's implicit insistence on our situatedness in and indebtedness to the "Enlightenment Project".

The third chapter ends with us becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which MacIntyre *demands* that we reject the Enlightenment Project, yet appropriates from it. We are also dissatisfied with the way in which we *must* simply return to Aquinas, although the only reason to do so is that it is *better* than Encyclopedic and Genealogical schemes *so far*.

To more eloquently formulate our dissatisfaction with MacIntyre's 'doublespeak' we must return to the novel-thesis where MacIntyre's project to reclaim the tradition of virtue ethics in the Aristotelian-Thomist sense, *After Virtue*, begins. It is in looking at *After Virtue* in retrospect that MacIntyre's project should be evaluated.

To recap, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre tells us that:

Either one must follow through the aspirations of the Enlightenment Project until there remains only the Nietzschean diagnosis and the Nietzschean problematic or one must hold that the Enlightenment



Project was not only mistaken but should never have been commenced in the first place. There is no third alternative[...]

(AV: 111)

MacIntyre gives us the ultimatum: 'choose between Nietzsche and Aristotle- there is no third alternative'. To this I ask the second part of my twofold question to MacIntyre. The question is whether the dichotomy of "Nietzsche versus Aristotle" represents the only viable alternatives for us in our efforts to continue the enterprise of moral theorising. This question can be split up into a further two questions:

- Does MacIntyre's ultimatum allow Aristotle to be vindicated on its own terms i.e. if we allow the ultimatum to be taken *seriously*?
- Is MacIntyre's ultimatum coherent?

In answering these questions, I draw on Richard Bernstein's excellent essay, published in 1986, "Nietzsche or Aristotle? Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*".

### **Bernstein on MacIntyre**

For Bernstein, MacIntyre's ultimatum represents the highest stakes possible in moral theory,

For the alternative posed by MacIntyre is not one view of morality versus another – it is, rather, *morality versus no morality* [my emphasis].

(Bernstein, 1986: 118)

A better alternative to what Bernstein is saying is perhaps to say that it is not that there will be *no* morality, but rather that we will be entirely the creators of our own moral precepts and intuitions. This is, I propose, truer to the

Nietzschean spirit. Why does Bernstein call "Nietzschean morality" "no morality"? Presumably, he regards "Nietzschean morality" as a grave degeneration in moral theory.

If taken seriously, who then wins the ultimatum, after *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*? It is Nietzsche who seems to win. Why does Nietzsche win? MacIntyre's ultimatum means that if Aristotle cannot be definitively vindicated<sup>1</sup>, Nietzsche wins by default. Yet at the end of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre explicitly says that the debate is far from settled and that it will *always be a debate in progress*. He speaks of 'the best reasons so far', of 'openness to refutation' and 'the possibility of surrendering to better conceptual schemes in the future'. It makes little sense then to propose a stark ultimatum, a la "Enlightenment Project", unless it can be backed up with ultimate knowledge. And the last mentioned, we have seen, is a chimera for MacIntyre.

Bernstein makes the point<sup>2</sup> that the tradition of the virtues seems as muddled as contemporary debates concerning morality. If even the most coherent moral scheme thus far - the tradition of the virtues - is muddled, then surely the Nietzschean diagnosis is right, or rather: surely the evidence points towards Nietzsche rather than Aristotle?

For Bernstein, the inconclusiveness of MacIntyre's narrative on the tradition of the virtues unwittingly presents an apology for the vindication of Nietzsche. Although Bernstein's article is written soon after *After Virtue*, his point remains the same. This point is later backed up by the findings of this thesis, namely that it is unlikely that there will be consensus on the greatest

---

<sup>1</sup> For the language of ultimatum is the language of the Enlightenment and it contains ideals of *ultimate* truth. Surely MacIntyre should avoid such language.

<sup>2</sup> 1986: 119



rationality of the Aristotelian-Thomist moral theory. As such Nietzsche wins the ultimatum by default.

The second question I am posing is, "Is MacIntyre's ultimatum coherent?" To this question I respond "no", or at least agree with Bernstein (1986: 135) that it is "systematically misleading".

For Bernstein, MacIntyre's attack on the "Enlightenment Project" is part of the present mood that might be called "the rage against the Enlightenment, or Modernity". This rage can be found in thinkers with whom MacIntyre may have little sympathy- Heidegger<sup>3</sup>, Adorno and Horkheimer. For Bernstein,

[t]here is overkill in these totalizing critiques – to use a Hegelian turn of phrase, there is also a "truth" in the Enlightenment project which itself needs to be reclaimed and preserved... for we do a grave injustice to the Enlightenment if we fail to appreciate the extent to which it was a legitimate protest against hypocrisy and injustice, if we fail to appreciate how it was acutely sensitive to the failures of moral and political ideologies that systematically excluded whole groups of human beings from participating in the "good life" while they "legitimized" political beliefs that masked various forms of domination.

(Bernstein, 1986: 135)

Bernstein's main point is not to defend the emancipatory intentions of the enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is to show how much MacIntyre appropriates from the very project that he tells us "had to fail". An excellent example of this appropriation is that MacIntyre accepts Kant's principle that we should treat

---

<sup>3</sup> For a good idea of the extent of Heidegger's rage against the Enlightenment and Modernity, as characterised by the "technological disclosure of being", *gestell*, see "The question concerning Technology" (1978).

<sup>4</sup> Barber (1988: 188) says, on the emancipatory nature of the Enlightenment, that:

After virtue is after Eden, but also after hierarchy, after slavery, after absolutism and after ignorance.



*all* people as an end and not as a means. Based on this, MacIntyre rejects Aristotle's account of the virtues that is based on the exclusion of those who do not belong to a proper *polis*, barbarians, slaves, women or whatever. Throughout *After Virtue*<sup>5</sup>, MacIntyre stresses that any adequate conception of the virtues and the "good life" cannot be based on the exclusion of any *human*. While MacIntyre can argue that what he is doing is strengthening the defects of the Aristotelian scheme (it is a living tradition after all), he does not reckon with the principles and standards according to which he does this. MacIntyre amends the tradition of the virtues according to principles that were hammered out during the Enlightenment; he utilizes the very moral precepts that were laboriously produced in the course of the Enlightenment as the latter developed in response to the hold of prejudice, superstition and repression so typical of the medieval society from which the Enlightenment gradually emancipated itself (Bernstein, 1986: 136-138). This simply proves that it is a much more complex business to criticise a tradition than to simply, as MacIntyre seems to suggest we do, dismiss it as something that "had to fail". Professor MacIntyre is as much a product of the very same tradition he dismisses as all of us, including Nietzsche; his evaluation of Aristotelian ethics is fundamentally influenced by his Enlightenment, modernist identity.

This thesis provides subsequent proof for this criticism in chapter 2, particularly in the section on Gadamer's preconditions for understanding. What MacIntyre does not heed is Gadamer's insistence on the idea that we always understand (at least initially) in terms of our own tradition - in our case, in terms of the aftermath of the Enlightenment Project. Or perhaps to put it better, MacIntyre does not fully acknowledge the implications of his own insistence on the normative force of tradition. MacIntyre forgets that he always already has one foot in the Enlightenment project. He can reject Aristotle's views but only in terms of "his own" (Enlightenment) prejudices concerning universal human rights. In Bernstein's words:

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example p. 149



It makes no historical sense to suggest that the "Enlightenment project was not only mistaken but that it should never have been commenced in the first place" [AV: 111]. To make such a claim, to oppose simply the failures of the "moderns" with the wisdom of the "ancients," is to violate MacIntyre's own insistence that we cannot escape our historicity, our social identities, nor the traditions which inform our lives – including the tradition of the Enlightenment itself.

(Bernstein, 1986: 139-140)

MacIntyre indeed appropriates an immense amount from the Enlightenment when advocating a return to the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition. His idea that it is worthwhile to gain consensus on moral issues through rational argumentation still represents ideals hammered out during the Enlightenment. Sure, he correctly rejects the idealised notion of absolute, impartial knowledge, but he still wants to restore rational order to moral theory. Why is this? Why not let the Nietzschean *Übermensch* prevail? It is because he is a "son of the Enlightenment" and his membership in this community is something he can never ultimately shake off.

MacIntyre's works also leave us with a melange of moral theories. He does not achieve in his later books the consensus and rationality in moral theory that he claims can be achieved in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre increasingly discovers as his research on moral theory continues that debate is *interminable*. Perhaps the time has come, therefore, to put it to him that his ultimatum in *After Virtue* is at best overstated and at worst, downright incoherent. The problem with this state of affairs is that it detracts from the lesser claim that he makes in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, namely that his Thomist moral theory is the most coherent and rational *so far*. While he gives good evidence that leans towards this point, the incoherence of the ultimatum detracts from the overall coherence of his thesis. For what is needed to vindicate Thomism is to show the coherence of its defense against other rival theories. In order to vindicate Thomism, MacIntyre is compelled to



once again return to *After Virtue* and clear up his own 'modern muddle concerning morality'.

On the other hand, MacIntyre has learnt from what Bernstein says in concluding his 1986 article on *After Virtue*:

The problem today is how we can live with the conflict and tension between the "truth" implicit in the tradition of the virtues and the "truth" of the Enlightenment. This is what MacIntyre's own narrative reveals. This is our narrative quest – for no one knows, nor can know, how this quest will turn out. This is the deepest problem with which we must live *after virtue*.

Strikingly, this is very similar to the conclusion that MacIntyre comes up with himself fourteen years later when writing *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* when he says that the conflict between rival moral theories is not yet terminated and that "these are struggles *in progress*" [my emphasis] (TRVME: 215).

### **On the idea of a third alternative to the ultimatum**

At the end of MacIntyre's work on moral theorising we increasingly see how the "struggles in progress" are not to be rationally decided between by a stark ultimatum. They are struggles to be hammered out by a matrix of participants from different traditions and modes of enquiry. There is disagreement over how to characterise what is at issue, yet mere participation in the writing of the history of these debates is to participate in the debates themselves (TRVME: 215).

My suggestion to MacIntyre is that there is always the possibility of a third alternative to the ultimatum. This idea is spawned by Hans-Georg Gadamer's preconditions for understanding, particularly one's situatedness in tradition



and the dialogic nature of understanding. MacIntyre should give his cultural heritage another look and more carefully consider the merits of the Enlightenment Project. Its aftermath, after all, represents the base-knowledge from which he interprets and understands the world and more specifically, the ancient world of Aristotle and Aquinas. Why does MacIntyre say "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" and not "Nietzsche or Kant and/or Hume?"

MacIntyre's ultimatum in *After Virtue* betrays what MacIntyre himself achieves in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* – a genuine "openness" to new ideas and to the idea that 'there can be something new under the sun'. This is what MacIntyre still has to reconcile in order to make his reclaiming of the Aristotelian tradition in moral theory more coherent.

*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* ends with MacIntyre coming a full circle - revisiting his earlier dismissals of traditions rivaling that of the virtues. The "failure" of his ultimatum in all the senses of the word discussed only adds to the "conversation that we are". Its failure adds to the scope of future moral theorising. And continue the project of moral theorising in 'the dark ages that are already upon us' we must, says MacIntyre. The problem with *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* is that it lands us in an environment of radical disagreement and a barrage of confusing claims all competing for our allegiance. MacIntyre's "long" history of ethics only lands the reader headfirst in (an even greater- in the sense of 'more comprehensive') "modern muddle concerning morality".

What we are left with at the end of MacIntyre's contemporary work is the question, "Does the 'Nietzsche or Aristotle?' ultimatum leave us with the only option with which we can continue the enterprise of moral theorising?" This thesis finds the ultimatum to be systematically misleading (at the very least) and what remains is to propose a constructive third alternative to the ultimatum. This third alternative must first of all articulate the conditions for ethics.



Imagine in this regard that MacIntyre enters into dialogue with contemporary moral theorist, Peter Singer, in order to hammer out what ethics is. Perhaps the dialogue goes as follows:

For Singer (1993: 4), moral theorising, and the ethics it produces, is not subjective or relative. His account affords a central role to reason in ethical decisions (1993: 8). His account is clearly at odds with the emotivism espoused by Ayer. On these general points, MacIntyre is in full agreement with him. Singer's view of ethics can be seen to develop in four steps:

1. Ethics is the attempt to give reasons for acting the way we do:

The notion of living according to ethical standards is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it.

(Singer, 1993: 10)

MacIntyre says that while this is true, ethics goes beyond giving reasons for one's own way of living. For MacIntyre, rational enquiry into ethics should in principle vindicate one way of living (i.e. the Aristotelian-Thomist way) over the others. However, the findings of this thesis are that this last claim is something that MacIntyre cannot coherently vindicate. MacIntyre does not convince us that the "neutral observer" who has not given his allegiance to any specific theoretical moral stance, who is torn between claims competing for his allegiance, will be convinced of the superior rationality of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition thus far. Following Gadamer, there is no "neutral observer" – all understanding is situated. Is this not a claim resembling Enlightenment thinking – namely, that the rationality of the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition is such that any rational person in their right mind must simply be converted to it? It makes no sense to propose that people have yet to make up their minds considering which ethical theory they



should give their allegiance to. Such people can only choose a different ethical theory by already holding a prior one. Holding a neutral position in a moral and ethical “vacuum” contravenes the preconditions for understanding. Where Singer agrees with MacIntyre is that this step is only a necessary beginning in saying what ethics is.

2. For Singer, the justification of one’s way of living must be of a certain kind. Namely, it cannot be in terms of self-interest, but must be addressed to a larger audience:

Self-interested acts must be shown to be compatible with more broadly based ethical principles if they are to be ethically defensible, for the notion of ethics carries with it the idea of something bigger than the individual.

(Singer, 1993: 10)

On this point, MacIntyre wholeheartedly agrees with Singer. MacIntyre is always at pains to show the social and cultural situatedness of ethics. For MacIntyre, ethics only makes sense in terms of the individual’s position in a larger cultural scheme.

3. For Singer, ethics must be *universal* in some sense. This idea is held to varying degrees by a melange of thinkers from the ancients to Jürgen Habermas.<sup>6</sup> What these thinkers agree on is that “an ethical principle cannot be justified in relation to any partial or sectional group. Ethics takes a universal point of view” (Singer, 1993: 11).

---

<sup>6</sup> For a historical discussion of thinkers that believe that ethics is somehow universal in some way or another see Singer (1993: 10-11).

While Singer and MacIntyre agree on this general point, what they make of the consequences of it marks a decisive split in their proposal on what ethics is. For Singer, the universality in ethics can be found in its utility:

4. The universal aspect of ethics, I suggest, does provide a persuasive, although not conclusive, reason for taking a broadly utilitarian position.

(Singer, 1993: 12)

In contrast, for MacIntyre, the universality in moral theorising can only be restored if one returns to a teleological scheme as contained in Aristotelian-Thomist thinking. The problem with this is that MacIntyre cannot guarantee that this step will restore consensus and intelligibility to moral theorising. At the end of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* he seems to agree with Singer that he (MacIntyre) can at best provide a persuasive, although not conclusive, reason for taking a broadly Aristotelian-Thomist position. However the language that MacIntyre's ultimatum in *After Virtue* is couched in presupposes that MacIntyre is offering us a *conclusive* reason for taking a broadly Aristotelian-Thomist tradition. Why does MacIntyre give us this ultimatum when he gives us insufficient reason to take his version of moral theorising over, for example, Singer's?

Where consensus between MacIntyre and Singer ends is the point at which we have to decide what we are going to do with the idea that there is some form of universality in moral theorising. If there is indeed universality in moral theorising, then it seems reasonable for MacIntyre to attempt to re-appropriate an ancient moral scheme. Where this re-appropriation goes wrong (and this thesis shows this in detail) is that MacIntyre does not fully appreciate or adequately spell out Gadamer's preconditions for understanding. For a better re-appropriation of Aristotle, let us consider Gadamer's work. Gadamer shows us how such a re-appropriation is to be



done. For the discussion of Gadamer's appropriation of Aristotle's notion of ethics, I draw on Warnke (1987: 91-9).

Gadamer's analysis of ethical understanding cannot be separated from hermeneutic understanding (Warnke, 1987: 94). Ethical understanding is one more instance of understanding in general. Gadamer hermeneutically appropriates many of the details of ethics in general from Aristotle's understanding of ethics.

When we understand, according to Gadamer, we initially accept the views of a foreign tradition, anticipating its completeness. However, the views of this tradition are not simply adopted, but change with historical circumstance. The same holds true of ethics. To elucidate what he means by this, Gadamer makes use of Aristotle's criticism of Plato's account of ethical knowledge.

For Plato, ethical knowledge is knowledge of the Form of the Good. In contrast, for Aristotle, ethical knowledge is an understanding of the good for man in concrete practical situations. Actors, says Gadamer (1975: 279) must see the concrete situation in the light of what is demanded of them in general. The problem here is that actors don't know what is demanded of them in general without acting in concrete situations. For Aristotle, one becomes a noble man by doing noble deeds. It is in doing noble deeds that our understanding of what it is to be noble is transformed. This is the hermeneutic circle that constitutes understanding. Gadamer analyses Aristotle's point by saying that ethical knowledge is more a matter of practical knowledge (*phronesis*) than theoretical knowledge. In ethics, according to Gadamer, we need to know "how" rather than know "that". How does ethical knowledge differ from technical knowledge for Gadamer? Warnke (1987; 93-94) makes three points in this regard:

- 1) Technical knowledge is less dependent on the concrete situation than ethical knowledge. Plugging a tooth, for example, is always



fundamentally the same exercise, while courage can involve a willingness to die or a refusal to die, according to the situation. The important point is that in the latter case one's ethical choice affects the norm and paradigm in question. In this case, "it is not just a matter of fulfilling the norm of courage as best one can but rather of filling in what that norm actually means." (Warnke, 1987: 93).

- 2) Technical knowledge is calculating and involves using means to achieve ends in the most efficient manner possible. While ethical knowledge also concerns ends, these ends have no clear content. The relationship between means and ends in ethical knowledge is a reciprocal one. Says Warnke (1987: 94):

The relationship between means and ends, then, is a reciprocal one. Ethical knowledge is a matter of weighing various options against a normative framework that is itself clarified through the options one chooses. For this reason it can never involve simply the application of a formula but rather requires reflection.

- 3) Ethical knowledge involves applying general principles to different concrete situations. This is the same as with technical knowledge except that "ethical knowledge is not unaffected by its mode of application, nor can the desired result be determined in advance of the situation." (Warnke, 1987: 94).

Ethical knowledge for Gadamer can only be concretized in the application of a general normative understanding to specific circumstances. The same holds true for hermeneutic understanding in general. We must relate the text of ethics to the situation in which we find ourselves if we are to understand at all. By applying the same hermeneutic method to ethics as to textual



understanding, game playing<sup>7</sup> and the social sciences in general, Gadamer gives us a more coherent understanding of ethics than does MacIntyre.

Where MacIntyre goes wrong is to not adequately separate the modes of enquiry specific to moral theorising, ethics, scientific understanding, epistemology etc. MacIntyre uses the epistemological terms of "victory", "defeat", "either-or", "vindication" etc. to elucidate his moral theorising. He would have done better to stick to the terminology appropriate to moral theorising as Gadamer does. An example of MacIntyre's 'mixing' of modes of enquiry and their appropriate methods of justification occurs in the conditions that he gives under which a tradition of enquiry can be vindicated.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (358), MacIntyre says that the test for truth is to summon as many objections (of the greatest strength possible) to a truth claim. We can with good reason hold to be true those claims that withstand this type of dialectical testing. The problem with this idea is that MacIntyre seems to draw on Popper's theory of what constitutes a scientific theory. According to Popper, a theory is only scientific if one stipulates the conditions under which it can be falsified. MacIntyre's mistake is to appropriate scientific method and to try and superimpose it on the social sciences. When this appropriation is complete, MacIntyre has simultaneously relativised epistemology – "truth is the best truth we have so far", whilst he makes the epistemological claim in *After Virtue* – "choose between Aristotle and Nietzsche, *there is no third alternative* (and while you are at it also choose Aristotle!)".

MacIntyre needs to tone down his claims and make them appropriate to what can coherently and legitimately be claimed by ethical theorising and the social sciences in general. In *After Virtue* he ignores the plea that Gadamer's re-appropriation of Aristotle makes:

---

<sup>7</sup> For an exposition of game playing see Warnke (1987: 48-55).



Virtuous people are not those who simply impose their knowledge on others or dogmatically apply their own experiences to the situations of others. They are rather those who want what is good for the other person involved, not what might be good for themselves, and are therefore *open to differences in experience and situation*.

(Warnke: 1987: 94. My emphasis.)

For MacIntyre to propose a dogmatic ultimatum that effectively shuts down openness to new experience betrays the *virtue* of his moral theorising. For we have already seen that, according to Gadamer's hermeneutic theory of ethics, practical ethical deeds alter ethical theory. If we are to take his claim in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, that an ethical theory is vindicated to the extent that it can account for and overcome its own inconsistencies, seriously, then the 'unvirtuous' ultimatum in *After Virtue* seriously detracts from the overall coherence of his project.

MacIntyre's ultimatum also misunderstands the extent to which he is already influenced by his agenda of wanting to reclaim the past. MacIntyre is a thinker who has always languished after antiquity and his attempt to reclaim the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition can be seen as giving reasons for his sentiments and intuitions. We have seen that both ethical knowledge and hermeneutic understanding involve application to varying situations and concerns. Consider the hermeneutic example of whether *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book:

The question of whether *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book only arises in a contemporary setting. However, one cannot read the book in a vacuum – reading the book and *then* applying its content to the question posed. The question *already* conditions the contents of the book. (Warnke, 1987: 96). For Gadamer, when we understand *Huckleberry Finn* in light of the posed question, we can only understand it differently or as he puts it in *Truth and*



*Method*, "We understand differently if we understand at all" (Gadamer, 1975: 264).

When this example is applied to MacIntyre's moral theorising, surely his love of antiquity will prejudice and condition the way in which he views Aristotle and Aquinas. MacIntyre would agree with this formulation. The problem is that his ultimatum does not sufficiently take note of the prejudice involved in moral theorising. To simultaneously propose that knowledge of moral theory is prejudiced and ultimate (hence the "either-or" language) makes no sense. MacIntyre disregards what he himself says about the partly parochial nature of knowledge of moral theory. Where both MacIntyre and Gadamer agree with Aristotle is that knowledge concerning moral theory begins with a proper upbringing and the appropriation of a general *normative* framework. This is, as we have seen, the birthplace of a third alternative to the ultimatum.

MacIntyre agrees with Gadamer on his next general step concerning understanding. This is that a tradition of understanding presents normative parameters for understanding. When we approach Shakespeare's work for example, we assume its literary excellence and importance (Warnke, 1987: 96). Similarly, MacIntyre assumes the excellence of Aristotle and Aquinas. Yet MacIntyre ignores what Gadamer goes on to say about hermeneutic understanding: that it both assumes the truth of its object and *modifies it*. As we have seen from Bernstein, MacIntyre assumes the truth of Aristotle and modifies it to include previously excluded slaves, women, scientific reason as opposed to teleology etc. However, MacIntyre's ultimatum is to be counterfactual to the "borrowing" between paradigms or to the mutual modification of paradigms. It makes no historical and hermeneutic sense to starkly oppose the wisdom of the ancients to the failings of contemporary thinkers. MacIntyre appropriates from the very failed paradigm that the purports to reject.

Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding of ethics is a coherent third alternative to MacIntyre's ultimatum. Gadamer keeps with the preconditions for understanding when he appropriates Aristotle. Aristotelian ethics can indeed be reappropriated but not by contrasting the tradition of the virtues with the "Enlightenment Project". The future of moral theorising should involve the continuation of the *dialogue* between Aristotle and *us*. Gadamer's reappropriation of Aristotle represents a viable angle to begin historical research on moral theorising. Says Gadamer (1975: 252-3):

What fills our historical consciousness is always a variety of voices in which the past echoes... Modern historical research is itself not only research but mediation of tradition. We do not see it only under the law of progress or of secured results; in it, as well, we have historical experiences, as it were, since each time in it a new voice is heard in which the past echoes.



## 5

**Conclusion**

To recap, this thesis seeks to evaluate MacIntyre's claim that recourse to the tradition of virtue ethics in the Aristotelian-Thomist sense is the only viable intellectual option, given the alleged demise of the so-called "Enlightenment Project". It raises a twofold question:

First, is it coherent to argue that such a re-appropriation of an ancient moral tradition is possible? Does such a claim duly reckon with the conditions under which meaningful forms are understood and applied?

In chapter 2 we see that MacIntyre does not sufficiently appreciate and spell out the preconditions for understanding, as stipulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer. We also see that his conception of rationality falls prey to relativism and thus weakens the coherence of his preconditions for rationally choosing between competing paradigms. At times MacIntyre uses the "ultimate" language of the enlightenment and at times rejects it. He simultaneously relativises epistemology and what counts as progress and makes epistemological claims. In chapter 3 we see that MacIntyre does not give us sufficient reason to give our allegiance to specifically the Aristotelian-Thomist moral tradition. He concedes that his findings on rival ethical theories and rationalities are inconclusive and that they represent debates *in progress*, yet he maintains that the Thomist tradition simply *must* be re-appropriated.

The second question we are asking to MacIntyre is whether the dichotomy of "Nietzsche versus Aristotle" represents the only viable alternatives in our efforts to continue moral theorising.

In chapter 4 we see that, following Bernstein and Gadamer, the ultimatum makes no historical and hermeneutic sense. In fact, if taken seriously, it

actually vindicates Nietzsche! The author proposes a third alternative to the ultimatum. This is Gadamer's hermeneutic re-appropriation of Aristotle's conception of ethics. It is a better way of continuing the project of moral theorising than the way paved by MacIntyre's ultimatum because it better incorporates the preconditions for hermeneutic and ethical understanding.



## References

Aquinas, T. 1945. "Summa Theologica", *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Random House.

Ayer, A.J. 1971. *Language, Truth and logic*. Middlesex: Pelican Books.

Barber, B. 1988. "Abdicating Modernity: Alasdair MacIntyre and the Revolt Against Liberalism", *The Conquest of Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Barthes, R. 1966. *Critique et Verite*. Paris.

Bernstein, R.J. 1986. "Nietzsche or Aristotle?: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*", *Philosophical Profiles*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Colby, M. 1995. "Moral Traditions, MacIntyre and Historicist Practical reason", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 53-78. London: Sage.

Davidson, D. 1985. "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme", Rajchman and West, *Post-Analytic Philosophy*.

Dreyfus, H.L. and Rabinow, P. 1982. *Michel Foucault Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Feyerabend, P. 1975. *Against Method*. London: NLB.

Foucault, M. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by Sheridan, A.M. New York: Harper Colophon.

Foucault, M. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Sheridan, A.M. New York: Vintage/Random House.

Foucault, M. 1980. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: an Introduction*. Translated by Hurley, R. New York: Vintage/Random House.

Fuller, M. 1998. *Making Sense of MacIntyre*. Vermont: Ashgate.

Gadamer, H. 1975. *Truth and Method*. New York: Seabury Press.

Gellner, E. 1974. *The Devil in Modern Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Heidegger, M. 1978. "The Question Concerning Technology", *Basic Writings*, edited by Krell, D.A. London: Routledge.

Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. (eds). *Rationality and Relativism*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Horton, J. and Mendus, S. (eds). 1994. *After MacIntyre Critical Perspectives on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Husserl, E. 1962. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. New York: Collier Books.

Husserl, E. 1970. *Logical Investigations*. New York: Humanities Press.

MacIntyre, A. 1967. *A Short History of Ethics*. London: Routledge.

MacIntyre, A. 1971. *Against the Self-Images of the Age*. London: Duckworth.



MacIntyre, A. 1976. "Contexts of Interpretation: Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*", *Boston University Journal* 27(1), pp. 41-46.

MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After Virtue a study in moral theory*. London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd.

MacIntyre, A. 1987. "Relativism, Power and Philosophy" in Baynes, K. et al (ed.), *After Philosophy End or Transformation?* Cambridge: MIT Press.

MacIntyre, A. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth.

MacIntyre, A. 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry Encyclopaedia Genealogy and Tradition*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre, A. 1991. "An Interview with Alasdair MacIntyre", *Cogito*, summer 1991.

Masolo, D.A. 1994. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Popper, K.R. 1963. *Conjectures and Refutations*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Rorty, R. 1980. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Van Niekerk, A.A. 1992. *Rasionaliteit en Relativisme*. Pretoria: RGN Uitgewers.

Warnke, G. 1987. *Gadamer Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wellmer, A. 1974. *Critical Theory of Society* (translated by Cumming, J.). New York: Seabury Press.

Winch, P. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Winch, P. 1964. "Understanding a Primitive Society", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1(4): 307-324

Wokler, R. 1994. "Projecting the Enlightenment", *After MacIntyre*, edited by Horton, R. and Mendus, S. Cambridge: Polity Press.